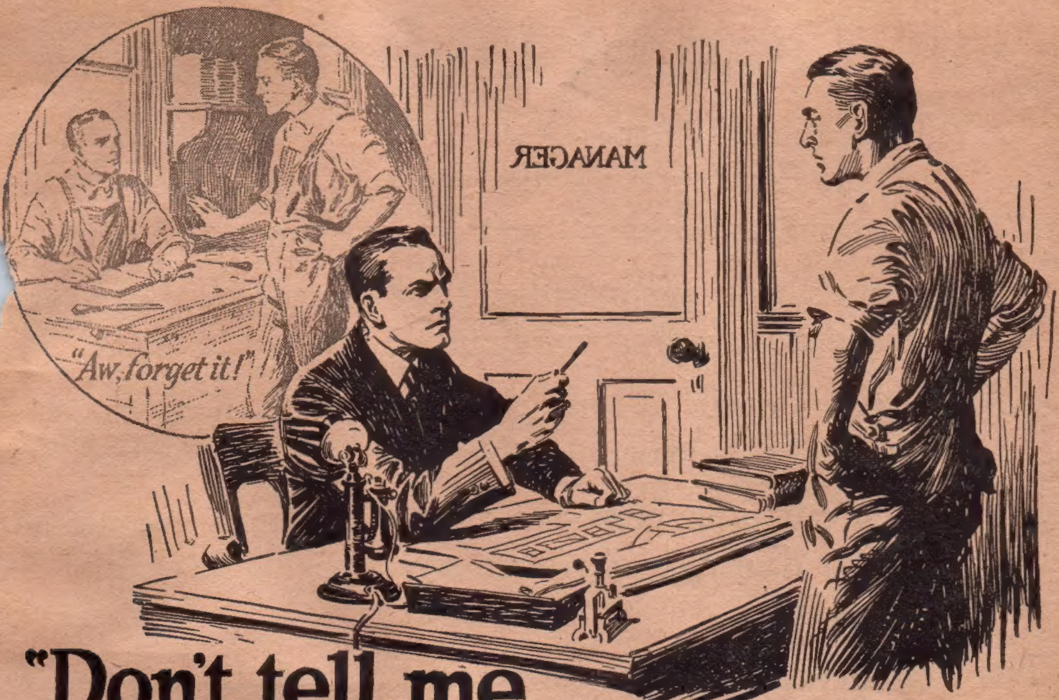

"Don't tell me you never had a chance!"

"Four years ago you and I worked at the same bench. We were *both* discontented. Remember the noon we saw the International Correspondence Schools' advertisement? That woke me up. I realized that to get ahead I needed special training, and I decided to let the I. C. S. help me. When I marked the coupon I asked you to sign with me. You said, 'Aw, forget it!'

"I made the most of my opportunity and have been climbing ever since. You had the same chance I had, but you turned it down. No, Jim, you can't expect more money until you've trained yourself to handle bigger work."

There are lots of "Jims" in the world—in stores, factories, offices, everywhere. Are *you* one of them? Wake up! Every time you see an I. C. S. coupon your chance is staring you in the face. Don't turn it down.

Right now over one hundred thousand men are preparing themselves for bigger jobs and better pay through I. C. S. courses.

You can join them and get in line for promotion. Mark and mail the coupon, and find out how.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS
Box 2042-C, Scranton, Penna.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full information about the subject *before* which I have marked an X in the list below:

BUSINESS TRAINING DEPARTMENT

☐ Business Management
☐ Industrial Management
☐ Personnel Organization
☐ Traffic Management
☐ Business Law
☐ Banking and Banking Law
☐ Accountancy (including C.P.A.)
☐ Nicholson Cost Accounting
☐ Bookkeeping
☐ Private Secretary
☐ Business Spanish ☐ French
☐ Salesmanship
☐ Advertising
☐ Better Letters
☐ Foreign Trade
☐ Stenography and Typing
☐ Business English
☐ Civil Service
☐ Railway Mail Clerk
☐ Common School Subjects
☐ High School Subjects
☐ Illustrating ☐ Cartooning

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL DEPARTMENT

☐ Electrical Engineering
☐ Electric Lighting
☐ Mechanical Engineer
☐ Mechanical Draftsman
☐ Machine Shop Practice
☐ Railroad Positions
☐ Gas Engine Operating
☐ Civil Engineer
☐ Surveying and Mapping
☐ Mine Foreman or Engineer
☐ Steam Engineering
☐ Wireless ☐ Airplane Engines
☐ Architect
☐ Contractor and Builder
☐ Architectural Draftsman
☐ Concrete Builder
☐ Structural Engineer
☐ Plumbing and Heating
☐ Chemistry
☐ Pharmacy
☐ Automobile Work
☐ Navigation
☐ Agriculture and Poultry
☐ Mathematics

Name..

Street Address..

City.......................................State..............................

Occupation..

Persons residing in Canada should send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada.

ADVENTURE
Aug. 30th, 1922

Published three times a month by The Ridgway Company at Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York City. Yearly subscription $6.00 in advance; single copy 25 cents. Entered as second-class matter Oct. 1, 1910, at the post-office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879.

Volume 36
Number 3

The Land of Unborn Babies

IN Maeterlinck's play—
"The Blue Bird," you see the exquisite Land—all misty blue—where countless babies are waiting their time to be born.

As each one's hour comes, Father Time swings wide the big gate Out flies the stork with a tiny bundle addressed to Earth.

The baby cries lustily at leaving its nest of soft, fleecy clouds—not knowing what kind of an earthly "nest" it will be dropped into.

Every baby cannot be born into a luxurious home—cannot find awaiting it a dainty, hygienic nursery, rivalling in beauty the misty cloud-land.

But it is every child's rightful heritage to be born into a clean, healthful home where the Blue Bird of Happiness dwells.

As each child is so born—
the community, the nation, and the home are richer. For just as the safety of a building depends upon its foundation of rock or concrete so does the safety of the race depend upon its foundation—the baby.

And just as there is no use in repairing a building above, if its foundation be *weak,* there is no use in hoping to build a strong civilization except through healthy, happy babies.

Thousands of babies—
die needlessly every year. Thousands of rickety little feet falter along Life's Highway. Thousands of imperfect baby-eyes strain to get a clear vision of the wonders that surround them. Thousands of defective ears cannot hear even a mother's lullaby.

And thousands of physically unfit men and women occupy back seats in life, are counted failures—all because of the thousands

The Land of Unborn Babies

and thousands of babies who have been denied the birthright of a sanitary and protective home.

So that wherever one looks—the need for better homes is apparent. And wherever one listens can be heard the call for such homes from the Land of Unborn Babies.

The call is being heard—

by the schools and colleges that are establishing classes in home-making and motherhood; by public nurses and other noble women who are visiting the homes of those who need help and instruction; by the hospitals that are holding Baby Clinics.

By towns and cities that are holding Baby Weeks and health exhibits; by magazines and newspapers that are publishing articles on pre-natal care.

By Congress that has passed the Mothers and Babies Act, under which health boards in every State will be called upon to give information to expectant mothers.

All this is merely a beginning—

The ground has hardly been broken for the Nation's only safe foundation—healthy babies—each of whom must have its rightful heritage—An Even Chance—a healthy body.

The call will not be *answered* until every mother, every father and every community helps to make better homes in which to welcome visitors from the Land of Unborn Babies.

The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company has been working years for improvement in home conditions and surroundings and rejoices in having helped thereby to reduce materially the death rate of babies and of mothers in childbirth. During this period the death rate from infectious diseases of children has been reduced 37%. The total death rate has been reduced 31.9%.

The work of this Company has been of such vital importance to its policyholders and the public, that it is publishing the results with the hope of showing to everyone, everywhere, that there is nothing more important than protecting the people of our land from preventable diseases and unnecessary death.

In 1921 the Metropolitan distributed 25,000,000 booklets dealing with the most important phases of health and disease. It will be glad to furnish on request, booklets telling the mother how to prepare for the baby; how to keep the home sanitary; how to protect her children against contagious diseases—how to make the family healthier and happier.

HALEY FISKE, *President*

Published by

METROPOLITAN LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY—NEW YORK

Go to School at Home!

High School Course in Two Years!

You Want to Earn Big Money!

And you will not be satisfied unless you earn steady promotion. But are you prepared for the job ahead of you? Do you measure up to the standard that insures success? For a more responsible position a fairly good education is necessary. To write a sensible business letter, to prepare estimates, to figure cost and to compute interest, you must have a certain amount of preparation. All this you must be able to do before you will earn promotion.

Many business houses hire no men whose general knowledge is not equal to a high school course. Why? Because big business refuses to burden itself with men who are barred from promotion by the lack of elementary education.

Can You Qualify for a Better Position

We have a plan whereby you can. We can give you a complete but simplified high school course in two years, giving you all the essentials that form the foundation of practical business. It will prepare you to hold your own where competition is keen and exacting. Do not doubt your ability, but make up your mind to it and you will soon have the requirements that will bring you success and big money. YOU CAN DO IT.

Let us show you how to get on the road to success. It will not cost you a single working hour. Write today. It costs you nothing but a stamp.

American School
Dept. H. C. 4, Drexel Ave. and 58th St., Chicago

American School
Dept. H. C. 4, Drexel Ave. and 58th St., Chicago

Send me full information on the subject checked and how you will help me win success.

....Architect
....Building Contractor
....Automobile Engineer
....Automobile Repairman
....Civil Engineer
....Structural Engineer
....Business Manager
....Cert. Public Accountant
....Accountant and Auditor
....Bookkeeper
....Draftsman and Designer
....Electrical Engineer
....Electric Light & Power
....General Education
....Vocational Guidance
....Business Law
....Lawyer
....Machine Shop Practice
....Photoplay Writer
....Mechanical Engineer
....Shop Superintendent
....Employment Manager
....Steam Engineer
....Foremanship
....Sanitary Engineer
....Surveyor (& Mapping)
....Telephone Engineer
....Telegraph Engineer
....High School Graduate
....Fire Insurance Expert
....Wireless Radio
....Undecided

Name ....

Address ....

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Oh, You Skinny!

STRONGFORT
The Perfect Man

Why stay thin as a rail? You don't have to! And you don't have to go through life with a chest that the tailor gives you; with legs you can hardly stand on. And what about that stomach that flinches every time you try a square meal? Are you a pill-feeder?

Do you expect Health and Strength in tablet form—through pills, potions and other exploited piffle?

The only way to be well is to build up your body — all of it, through Nature's methods — not by pampering the stomach. It is not fate that is making you a failure; it's that poor emaciated body of yours; your half-sickness shows plain in your face, and the world loves healthy people. So be HEALTHY—STRONG—VITAL. That's living. Mention the ailments upon which you wish Special Information and send with a 10c piece (one dime) to help pay postage on my **Special Talk on Thinness** and my book, **"Promotion and Conservation of Health, Strength and Mental Energy."** Don't put it off — send for my free book **Right Now.**

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Physical and Health Specialist
Dept. 919 **Newark, New Jersey**

FREE CONSULTATION COUPON
Absolutely Confidential

Mr. Lionel Strongfort, Dept. 919, Newark, N. J.—
Please send me your book, **"PROMOTION AND CONSERVATION OF HEALTH, STRENGTH AND MENTAL ENERGY,"** for postage on which I enclose a 10c piece (one dime). Send me special information on subjects marked (X) below, without obligation, also on those I may write on extra line below.

..**Colds**
..**Catarrh**
..**Hay Fever**
..**Asthma**
..**Obesity**
..**Headache**
..**Thinness**
..**Rupture**
..**Lumbago**
..**Neuritis**
..**Neuralgia**
..**Flat Chest**
..**Insomnia**
..**Short Wind**
..**Flat Feet**
..**Constipation**
..**Biliousness**
..**Torpid Liver**
..**Indigestion**
..**Nervousness**
..**Poor Memory**
..**Rheumatism**
..**Gastritis**
..**Heart Weakness**
..**Poor Circulation**
..**Despondency**
..**Skin Disorders**
..**Anemia**
..**Great Strength**
..**Falling Hair**
..**Deformity (Describe)**
..**Stomach Disorders**
..**Pimples**
..**Blackheads**
..**Round Shoulders**
..**Lung Troubles**
..**Muscular Development**
..**Weak Back**

Mention other ailment here ....

Name ....

Age........Occupation ....

Street ....

City.......................... State..............

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Make Radio a profession instead of a plaything. You can earn big money as a Radio-trician. Learn by mail, in spare time, how to design, construct, install, repair, maintain, operate, sell and demonstrate complete radio outfits. Write for free 32-page catalog describing our course entitled, "How to Learn Radio at Home."

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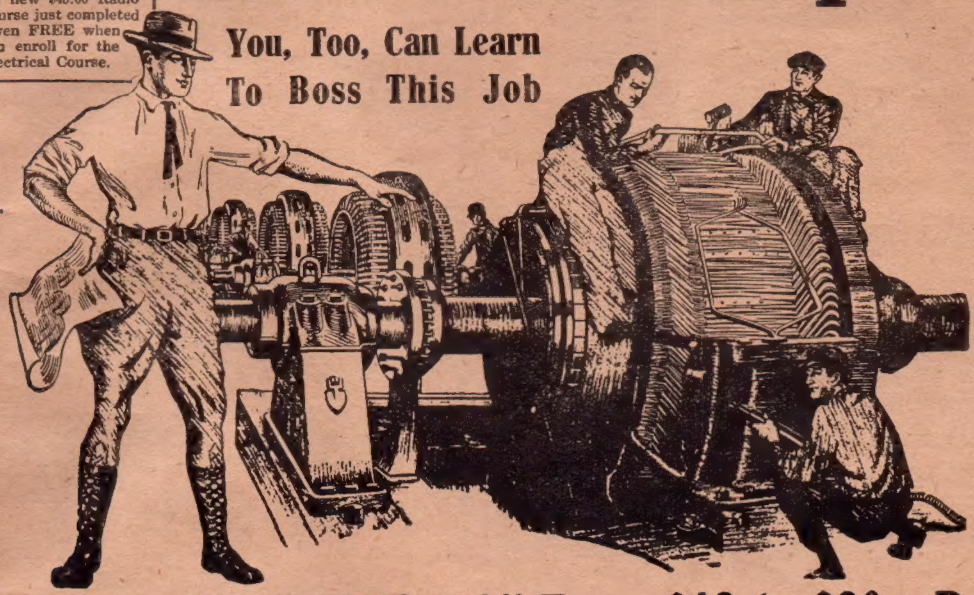
Radio Course FREE

My new $45.00 Radio Course just completed given FREE when you enroll for the Electrical Course.

Be a Certificated Electrical Expert

You, Too, Can Learn To Boss This Job



"ELECTRICAL EXPERTS" Earn $12 to $30 a Day

What's *YOUR* Future?

Trained "Electrical Experts" are in great demand at the highest salaries, and the opportunities for advancement and a big success in this line are the greatest ever known.
"Electrical Experts" earn $70 to $200 a week. Fit yourself for one of these big paying positions.

Be an "Electrical Expert"

Today even the ordinary electrician—the "screw driver" kind is making money—big money. But it's the trained man—the man who knows the whys and wherefores of Electricity—the "Electrical Expert"—who is picked out to "boss" ordinary electricians—to boss big jobs—the jobs that pay.

$3,500 to $10,000 a Year

Get in line for one of these "Big Jobs," by enrolling now for my easily-learned, quickly-grasped, right-up-to-the-minute, Spare-Time Home Study Course in Practical Electricity.

Age or Lack of Experience No Draw-Back

You don't have to be a College Man; you don't have to be a High School graduate. My Course in Electricity is the most simple, thorough, and successful in existence, and offers every man, regardless of age, education, or previous experience, the chance to become, in a very short time, an "Electrical Expert," able to make from $70 to $200 a week.

I Give You a Real Training

As Chief Engineer of the Chicago Engineering Works I know exactly the kind of training a man needs to get the best positions at the highest salaries. Hundreds of my students are now earning $3,500 to $10,000. Many are now successful ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS.

Satisfaction Guaranteed

So sure am I that you can learn Electricity—so sure am I that after studying with me, you, *too*, can get into the "big money" class in electrical work, that I will guarantee under bond to return every single penny paid me in tuition, if, when you have finished my course, you are not satisfied it was the best investment you ever made.

FREE—Electrical Working Outfit—FREE

I give each student a Splendid Outfit of Electrical Tools, Materials and Measuring Instruments absolutely FREE. I also supply them with Drawing Outfits, examination paper, and many other things that other schools don't furnish. You do PRACTICAL work—AT HOME. You start right in after the first few lessons to WORK AT YOUR PROFESSION in a practical way.

SAVE $45.50 BY ENROLLING NOW

You can save $45.50 in tuition by enrolling now. Let me send you full particulars of my great Special Offer, and my Free booklet on "How to Become An Electrical Expert."

L. L. COOKE, CHIEF ENGINEER
CHICAGO ENGINEERING WORKS
INCORPORATED
Dept. 43-C, 2150 Lawrence Ave., Chicago, Ill.

L. L. COOKE, Chief Engineer, Chicago Engineering Works, Dept. 43-C, 2150 Lawrence Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Dear Sir: Send me at once full particulars of your great Special Offer; also your Free booklet on "How to Become An Electrical Expert." No obligation on my part.

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Address ....

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THE "COOKE" TRAINED MAN IS THE "BIG-PAY MAN"

A Big Raise in Salary

Is Very Easy to Get, if You Go About It in the Right Way

You have often heard of others who doubled and trebled their salaries in a year's time. You wondered how they did it. Was it a pull? Don't you think it. When a man is hired he gets paid for exactly what he does, there is no sentiment in business. It's preparing for the future and knowing what to do at the right time that doubles and trebles salaries.

Remember When You Were a Kid

and tried to ride a bike for the very first time? You thought that you would never learn and then—all of a sudden you knew how, and said in surprise: "Why it's a cinch if you know how." It's that way with most things, and getting a job with big money is no exception to the rule, if you know how.

We Will Show You How

Without loss to you of a single working hour we can show you a sure way to successs and big pay. A large number of men in each of the positions listed are enjoying their salaries because of our help—we want to help you. Make check on the coupon against the job you want and we will help you get it. Write or print your name on the coupon and send it in today.

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Dept. G. C. 4, Drexel Ave. and 58th St., Chicago

American School
Dept. G. C. 4, Drexel Ave. and 58th St., Chicago
Send me full information on the subject checked and how you will help me win success.

....Architect
....Building Contractor
....Automobile Engineer
....Automobile Repairman
....Civil Engineer
....Structural Engineer
....Business Manager
....Cert. Public Accountant
....Accountant and Auditor
....Bookkeeper
....Draftsman and Designer
....Electrical Engineer
....Electric Light & Power
....General Education
....Vocational Guidance
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....Machine Shop Practice
....Photoplay Writer
....Mechanical Engineer
....Shop Superintendent
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Address..

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For Summer Time And All the Time

All Ingersoll watches are good timekeepers. Sturdy, reasonable, reliable, good looking, they carry a sound guarantee.

You need not worry about loss, theft nor breakage. The cost of a new Ingersoll is so small, comparatively. Twelve models, including Radiolites. See dealers' displays.

INGERSOLL WATCH CO., Inc.
New York San Francisco
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Yankee
$1.50

An Easy Way to Remove Dandruff

If you want plenty of thick, beautiful, glossy, silky hair, do by all means get rid of dandruff, for it will starve your hair and ruin it if you don't.

The best way to get rid of dandruff is to dissolve it. To do this, just apply a little Liquid Arvon at night before retiring; use enough to moisten the scalp, and rub it in gently with the finger tips.

By morning, most, if not all, of your dandruff will be gone, and three or four more applications should completely remove every sign and trace of it.

You will find, too, that all itching of the scalp will stop, and your hair will look and feel a hundred times better. You can get Liquid Arvon at any drug store. A four-ounce bottle is usually all that is needed.

The R. L. Watkins Co., Cleveland, Ohio

Agents

LARGE MANUFACTURER OF SHIRTS wants Agents to sell complete line of shirts direct to wearer. Exclusive patterns. Big values. No capital or experience required. Write for free samples.

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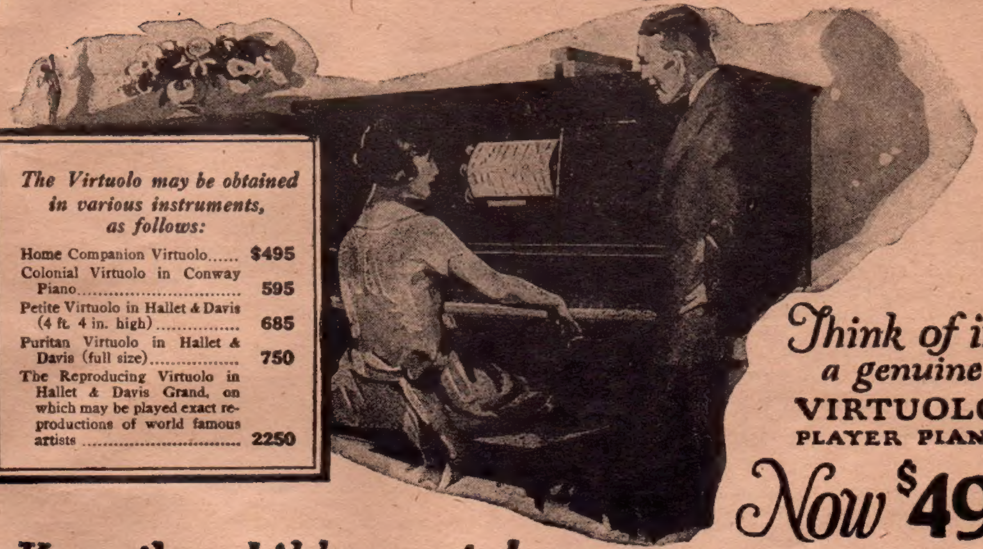
507 Broadway New York, N. Y.

Our New Plan *makes it amazingly easy to own this* Beautiful Player Piano



The Virtuolo may be obtained in various instruments, as follows:

Home Companion Virtuolo	$495
Colonial Virtuolo in Conway Piano	595
Petite Virtuolo in Hallet & Davis (4 ft. 4 in. high)	685
Puritan Virtuolo in Hallet & Davis (full size)	750
The Reproducing Virtuolo in Hallet & Davis Grand, on which may be played exact reproductions of world famous artists	2250

Think of it!
a genuine
VIRTUOLO
PLAYER PIANO
Now **$495**

Keep the children at home

Eminent Authorities Endorse This Method

THE atmosphere and environment of the American home is today forced to compete with the foreign attractions of jazz halls and light plays. These influences on our growing boys and girls deserve serious thought and are causing widespread attention.

A Plan with an Object

A solution of this artificial condition undermining American homes is now offered by a world famed musical institution. It has been endorsed by foremost educators.

The plan is to put music in every home and provide a counter-attraction to these dangerous outside influences. Music will help to keep the children at home and will entertain you too.

Wouldn't you like to own a beautiful new player piano, built by a company world-famous for its achievements in producing the highest type of instruments?

You can now do so easily and conveniently regardless of your circumstances. A remarkable plan has been carefully worked out and the new features in the pricing and financing will astonish you.

So Simple—So Unusual

This plan would be impossible if it were not backed by a company whose activities were world-wide and whose finances were unusually strong. The Hallet & Davis Piano Company back this movement and are in a position to carry it out because they possess these essentials.

The coupon below will give you this confidential information by return mail. It marks a new departure which puts this wonderful instrument into homes of moderate means, where formerly they were obtainable only by the financially prominent.

This plan meets the *individual requirements* of every family, in every status and condition.

All parents should get the facts without fail. They are confidential. They will surprise you. Do it now to obtain them quickly. Mail the coupon at once.

THE VIRTUOLO
PLAYER PIANO
Made by
HALLET & DAVIS
Established 1839

CONFIDENTIAL
INFORMATION COUPON
HALLET & DAVIS PIANO CO.,
146 Boylston St., Boston, Mass.

Send me confidential prices and terms of Virtuolo.

Name..
Address..
City.......................... *State*..........................

Do You Want an income Like These?

	E.A.Sweet	C.A.Rowe	W.J.McCrary
July	$ 925.00	$ 919.00	$ 751.00
Aug.	$ 891.00	$ 936.00	$ 865.00
Sept.	$ 667.00	$ 1228.00	$ 527.00
Oct.	$ 1200.00	$ 993.00	$ 703.00

ARE you willing to step into a position to-day, without training, without any investment, where you are absolutely *your own boss*, where you can set your *own hours*—work when and where you please—and have an income of $50.00 to $200.00 a week? Then send me your name and I will tell you how to get started.

I want 500 men and women to take orders for Comer Raincoats right in their own communities. I will make *you* the same offer I made Sweet, Rowe and McCrary. Rowe was a baker and started by using only his spare time, yet he makes around $800.00 a month. McCrary was making $2.00 a day and now his earnings are close to $9,000 a year. No matter where you live, or what you do, you can increase your income if you will devote one or two hours each day to this proposition. *No experience is necessary.* I will furnish a complete selling outfit, will tell you what to say and how to make the money. I will see that you get your profit the *same day* you earn it, without waiting, without delays.

- - - Mail This Coupon TO-DAY - - -

The COMER MFG. CO., Dept. K-71, Dayton, Ohio

I am ready to start as a Comer Representative if you can show me how I can make from $50 to $200 a week. Please send me, without any expense or obligation to me, complete outfit and instructions.

Name..

Address.......................................

....

Read These Earnings Records

Newton made $614.68 in October, Robinson made $703.60, Wilson made $445.11. Hamilton made $721.00 in September. Conners made $613.00. Ed Wimberly makes from $250.00 to $350.00 a month in his spare time only. Maggie McCoy wrote "my earnings will be over $3,000 this year." George Garon made a clear profit of $40.00 in his first day's work. H. G. Greenwood cleaned up $354.00 in his second month as a Comer representative. R. W. Krieger made $20.00 net profit in one-half hour. A. B. Spencer made $625.00 in one month. I now offer *you* this *same* opportunity.

No Investment Required

It is not necessary for you to invest any money. I will provide you with all the materials and instructions that you will need. In addition to the big regular profits, I offer hundreds of dollars each month in bonuses, so that you have unlimited opportunities to make big profits just as soon as you get my offer.

Special Opportunity for Women

We have a special proposition through which any woman can add $25.00 a week or more to her income by using one or two hours a day spare time.

SEND NO MONEY!

If you are interested in increasing your income from $100 to $1,000 a month, and can devote all your time or only an hour or so a day to this same proposition in your territory, write at once to the Comer Manufacturing Company, Dayton, Ohio. They will send you without any preliminary correspondence or red tape a complete selling outfit, with full instructions, samples, style-book, order book and everything you need to get started. Sign and mail the coupon now and in less than a week you can be making more money than you ever believed possible.

C. E. COMER

The Comer Mfg. Co., Dept. K-71, Dayton, Ohio

AUGUST
30th
1922
25c

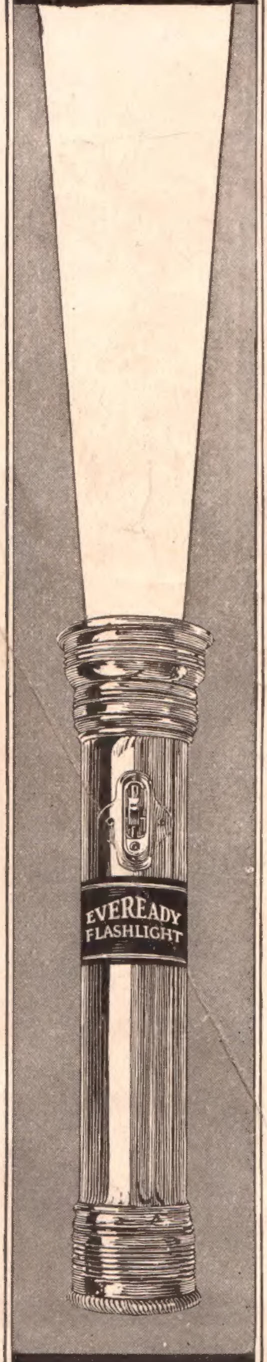
PUBLISHED
THREE TIMES A MONTH

Adventure

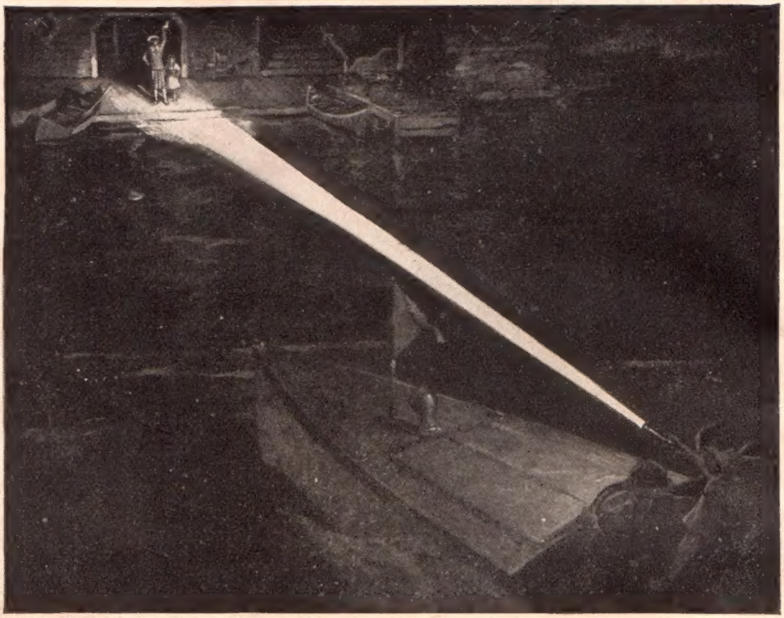
Harold Lamb
Max Bonter
Frederick R. Bechdolt
J. Allan Dunn
Lewis H. Kilpatrick
Robert Simpson
E. O. Foster
John Joseph Scarry
Edwin Cole
F. St. Mars

AUGUS[illegible] ISSUE, 1922
VOL. X[illegible]XVI No. 3
ADVENTURE
25 Cents

Eveready Spotlight
with the
300-ft. Range



There's an Eveready Flashlight complete for every purpose from $1.35 to $4



AN EVEREADY FLASHLIGHT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN A LIFE PRESERVER

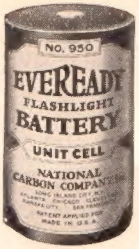
Eveready Spotlight — a vacation necessity

Vacation time again! And this Eveready Spotlight, *with its 300-ft. shaft of electric brilliance,* adds more enjoyment to the evenings than anything else in the kit! A handy necessity for motor boating, canoeing, or rowing; going over to the dance; flashing signals; strolling down the road; emergency use in your automobile; lighting the way everywhere.

MONEY-BACK OFFER

Try out this wonderful spotlight without risk. Buy one of any Eveready dealer for $3.75. Use it over night, flashing it on objects near and far. If you are not glad to keep it, return it the next day, and the dealer will refund your money. But you will keep it, and you would not be without an Eveready Spotlight for many times its small cost.

For sale everywhere at electrical, hardware, sporting goods, drug, and auto accessory shops; garages; general stores.



Eveready Flashlight Batteries give brighter light; last longer; fit and improve all makes of flashlights

EVEREADY
FLASHLIGHTS
& BATTERIES

Aug·30·1922
Vol·36·No·3

Adventure
Reg. in U.S. Patent Office

Published Three Times a Month by THE RIDGWAY COMPANY

J. H. GANNON, President — C. H. HOLMES, Secretary and Treasurer

Spring and Macdougal Streets - - New York City
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Entered as Second-Class Matter, October 1, 1910, at the Post-Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879.

ARTHUR SULLIVANT HOFFMAN, Editor

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The editor assumes no risk for manuscripts and illustrations submitted to this magazine, but he will use all due care while they are in his hands.

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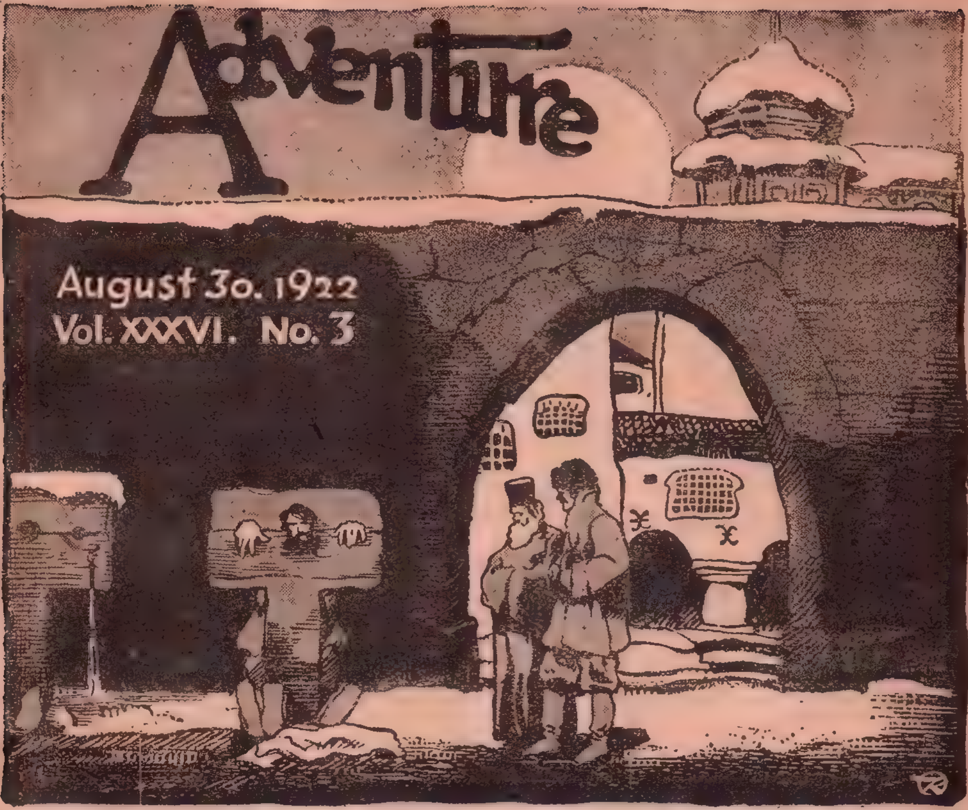
**Don't forget the dates of issue for *Adventure*—
the 10th, 20th and 30th of each month**



THE ROAD OF THE GIANTS

A Complete Novel by HAROLD LAMB

Author of "The Net," "Sangar," etc.

CHAPTER I

AN ACCOUNT OF HOW CAPTAIN BILLINGS LOST HIS LUGGAGE

He who sets forth upon the road knows not what the road will bring; nor does he know the hour of his return.—Mongol proverb.

"GOD go with you, my excellent sir. Keep to the highroad, by all means and don't fail to watch the verst-posts, my good gentleman. It's a matter of some twenty versts to Zaritzan, maybe thirty or forty."

The stranger who had stopped to eat a hasty supper at the frontier post on the highroad from Astrakan to Zaritzan sprang into the saddle of his pony and pulled the fur lapels of his greatcoat up around his ears. This made the soldier curious, for in the year of our Lord 1771, in the beginning of February when the ice on the Volga was solid enough to support a coach and six, few travelers ventured alone along the frontier between Russia and the Tatar tribes.

"Take my advice, sir, and hire a *troika* with three fine horses that will pull you like the wind and a postillion to guide you over the way. Just beyond these windmills a woman and her baby were gobbled up by the cursed wolves. True, I assure you, by the holy pictures. If you lose your way you are done for, quite. Devil take me, sir, it's cold work standing here talking to you—Ah, my grateful thanks, well born!"

Captain Minard Billings, of Edinburgh and late of the high seas, tossed the Russian

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a silver shilling. It was one of his last, and he had not hired a sledge because the supper had nearly emptied his purse.

"Remember," the man called after him, "keep due north along the right bank of the Volga. On the other bank begins the great steppe where you would lose your way at the first turn. Then the men from over the river would rip you up like a fish and leave you in the snow. Mind my words—" his hoarse voice grew fainter—"if you see a Tatar from over the river pistol him at once."

Passing the windmills at the end of the hamlet, Captain Billings smiled. A cheerful road this, he reflected.

It would have been better, of course, to have lain the night at the post and gone on by daylight. But Captain Billings had an appointment that evening at Zaritzan and he meant to keep it. There was a commission awaiting him at Zaritzan, and he meant to have it.

Captain Billings had been stranded at Astrakan, after completing a survey of the north coast of the Caspian for Governor Beketoff, of that town. Beketoff had been most polite, but being out of funds and likewise out of favor with the territorial ministry at St. Petersburg, Billings was not paid. Nightly he had played chess with the governor and sampled every vintage of wine the castle boasted.

The wine was not good, and Billings tired of putting Beketoff to bed every evening under the table. So he had borrowed a good pony from the governor, and—since he could not pay for a sledge—had entrusted his luggage to a detail of Cossacks under a *sotnik*, bound up the ice-coated Volga.

Now this luggage of Captain Billings was very valuable, to himself at least. It was the first time he had parted with it, even for a few days. It was a peculiar thing, that luggage. But the Cossacks traveled more slowly than he, and Billings had sent word ahead by courier that he would be at Zaritzan before midnight. He had a habit of keeping his promises.

From time to time as he rode, he tried to catch a glimpse of the gray sheet of the Volga, somewhere to his right. But the forest had set in again and the spruces made a corridor of the road that was merely a narrow track in the snow.

Already the sun was behind the pines, and a cold wind stirred up the fine snow into a dust that stung his face. He pulled down his sheepskin cap and fell to beating his arms across his chest. And he did not notice that the verst posts were no longer to be seen. In fact the trail he followed had narrowed down to the track of a single horse.

"My faith, it's cold as —— when the devil's gone to mass," Captain Billings assured himself. "And not so much as a tavern to break the hedgerows."

His gray-greenish eyes, spaced wide, surveyed the shadows of the forest slowly. His high cheek bones were reddened by long exposure to the sun of the Caspian. Billings was of middle age with a back like a pikestaff and a swagger to his shoulders that concealed his lack of height.

Since boyhood—and a thankless one—he had grown up with weapons, lived by his wits. He wore no wig, and his yellow hair had been bleached by the sun to the color of tow. School had been, for him, the apprenticeship at the table of a master navigator, and the *salle d' armes* of a French swordsman, now unhappily dead during the vicissitudes of that changeful lady, Paris. He had not always found bread in plenty, but there had been no lack of fighting.

"A pox on these misbegotten Muscovite charts!"

He had noticed the absence of the verst, posts. These, however, had been covered for the most part by drifting snow. The moon had risen on his right, and by its light he scanned the lines of the map of the frontier. According to it he should have been at Zaritzan by now.

Instead, he was off the highroad. He could go back to the last post, or turn out into the river and wait for the sledge which should be along that night. But neither choice was to his liking. He tore up the worthless chart and plied his pony's flanks with the black Cossack whip he carried, resolved to follow the track of the horse in front of him so long as it led to the north.

As if in answer to his decision, the howl of a wolf came up the wind. Billings steadied the pony, and settled himself in the saddle. He no longer needed the whip. His eyes narrowed against the cut of the wind, his glance thrusting into the shadows on either hand, to pick out the yellow gleam of eyes.

Drawing off a glove, his numbed fingers felt of the priming of the long pistols in the saddle holsters; the snow had dampened the powder.

Now the trees were thinning; curling wraiths of snow danced in the shifting moonlight as the wind came with a sweep across the dunes of the open. A moment later he drew in his horse. Beside the trail a figure appeared, standing over a dead pony.

"Zounds!" cried Billings under his breath. "Here's a merry go."

The other, in a long *kaftan* and a tall sheepskin hat too large for him, seemed to be no more than a boy, a swarthy boy with eyes like black jewels. He held a simitar that dripped blood upon the white surface of the snow. Billings observed that the throat of the horse had been cut.

Promptly the lad, who might have been Gipsy or Tatar, sheathed his weapon and stood straight and quiet.

"*Koshkildui*, peace be with you, brother," said Captain Billings in Russian. "Get up behind me, young man."

The stripling took his time about answering.

"You are a *giaour*—an outlander," he observed slowly, in the southern dialect. "You are no man of Russia—I knew that by your first speech."

"Indeed!" Billings pulled at his yellow mustache. "Do you wish to follow your horse into the bellies of the wolves who are back yonder?"

"*Tchu*—I fear no wolves, uncle. You ride from Astrakan, and you have been at the palace of the excellency, Beketoff."

"The ——," thought Billings, reining in his uneasy horse, "this fellow is uncommonly particular about whom he joins company with!"

The rapscallion, however, had a certain bravado about him; might be a Gipsy, for all of his smooth, olive skin and large eyes. And he had certainly kept his sword ready to hand until spoken to.

"Uncle," went on the youth impassively, "if you were a Russian *boyar*, a noble, you wouldn't offer to take up a poor Gipsy behind you—now would you? Not when the wolves were afoot."

"Nephew, I am Captain Minard Billings, cartographer, and I am minded to leave you afoot."

"Cartographer—what is that?"

"A maker of maps."

In the moonlight a smile flashed over the face of the native. There was an elusive charm about the boy. Certainly, for all his respect, he did not speak in the manner of a serf or a suppliant son of Egypt.

Billings grunted.

"If you are satisfied, step out!"

With that he put spurs to the pony. The native promptly shed his heavy coat and ran beside, on the hard surface of the crust, clinging to a stirrup.

"How far is it to Zaritzan?" asked Billings.

"Two leagues, good uncle."

"The black pest on those Russians!"

At this the youth glanced up, startled. Billings had been thinking of the discarded chart.

"Is this the highroad, young man?"

"Nay, the road joined the river bank, well back in the forest. But this track will lead you there."

Before long they heard a chorus of yelping howls in the distance. The wolf pack had reached the horse. The boy glanced up.

"My pony fell and came up lame. The wolves were near, so I cut its throat. Here we are in the forest again, and we must go swiftly."

With that he was up behind Billings, his breath warm on the traveler's neck. To keep his balance, the boy clung to the other's belt, reaching around to the clasp. Once the belt slipped, and the native tightened it. He had drawn his simitar and held it awkwardly in front of Billings.

"Pardon!" he cried.

The blade, slipping down, had cut the captain slightly across the upper leg. As if ashamed of the mishap he leaped down again, running beside the pony.

Although nothing more was heard of the wolves, they set a good pace until they passed an empty sentry box and, around a turn in the road, sighted the black bulk of a wall behind which rose the thatched roofs of houses, and a watch-tower.

"Zaritzan," panted the boy, pointing to a light that showed by the *stanitza* gate.

"Good!" Billings dismounted. "A bowl of hot porridge now, and some steaming brandy!"

"I can not enter Zaritzan."

"Why not? Where would you go?"

The boy pointed to where the light—a lanthorn in the hand of a soldier, the same who had prudently deserted the sentry box—was moving toward them slowly.

"The wolves I fear are within the gate, uncle."

"Hum." Billings wondered what manner of man this was who preferred the black depths of the Volga forest to a town. "Hulloa—what are you about?"

The native had been whispering under his breath. His expressive eyes were serious. Now he seized the officer's fingers and lifted their hands in the air, toward the south and the other quarters of the compass. On the back of his wrist was a cut over which the blood had dried.

On Billings' fingers was the stain of blood from the slight wound over his knee.

"My lord," whispered the boy, "you have looked in the face of danger for my sake. This night you have saved my life, although you know not how. Now I have made us *andas*, brothers, as you first named me."

"And what foolery is that?" Billings pulled his hand away impatiently.

"When men become *andas*, my brother, both have one life; neither abandons the other and each guards the life of his *anda*. Tonight I have bound the girdles and let flow the blood of both, and made strong our *anda*."

A Tatar! Billings remembered the boy had said he came from over the river. A native, Gipsy or Baskir or Tatar, would not go through this mummery of brotherhood without expecting some reward.

A second time the Tatar smiled.

"Give me your horse for this night and you will not lose it." His eyes flickered from the advancing sentry to Billings' face.

"Indeed, I will not. The wolves would make marrow paste of the mare."

"Not they, my lord. The mare will be under your hand within two days. Come, you have given me something already, Captain Beel-ing. Are we not *andas?*"

The boy stiffened, leaped boldly into the saddle, and was off pelting through the dead bushes.

"Pardon, my lord—brother," he called back, laughing, over his shoulder.

Billings snatched at his belt and shrugged. Both his pistols were in the saddle holsters. His temper flared as he watched the mare and rider go flitting along the edge of the hemlocks down toward the shining lane that was the moon's reflection on the river.

It was rather curious, the ease with which the Tatar guided the tired horse away from shelter, riding as if he were one with the mare. There was no help for it. Horse and weapons were gone, and Billings felt the loss of both keenly.

"A witch," suggested the soldier, who had drawn close and was watching.

Billings reflected that the sentry at the last post had told him to shoot down any Tatar at sight.

"Oh, he bewitched me rarely," he muttered, disliking the idea of arriving in Zaritzan on foot, like a peasant.

"Of course," nodded the soldier, holding the lanthorn close to his visitor. "I saw it done. He did it with your hand, sir, like a regular Tatar werewolf, snatching where the blood runs."

The bearded sergeant was busy making the sign of the cross with his free hand. It was perplexing, after all, that the native had shown so little dread of the wolves.

"The Lord be merciful to us!" The sentry was staring at the cut in Billings' breeches. "See, there's where he sipped your blood. They usually take the back of the neck, just behind the ear."

When Billings looked up, the man was running toward the gate, stumbling over his musket in his haste. Dropping the firearm, he fumbled with the door to shut it. This was a trifle too much for Billings to stomach.

He sprang into the opening, wedged his boot against the door and flung it back on the soldier.

"Hide of Beelzebub—so you would leave a Christian to the cold and the beasts, eh? A sergeant, too, on my word."

Muttering that he had orders to admit no strangers, the man changed countenance when Billings thrust his musket into his hand, wheeled him about, and requested that he announce to the *pristof*, Kichinskoi, that Captain Billings was here from Astrakan.

"At once—at once, your excellency. I assure you, captain, the witch robbed me of my senses. Enter, your honor. The Great Commissioner is expecting you, and gave word you were to go direct to his quarters."

But when Billings was not looking, the soldier backed away making the sign to ward off devils, with fingers crossed.

Billings paid no attention to him. He had just discovered that the purse attached to his belt for safekeeping had disappeared.

THE moon by now was well overhead, and the whole of Zaritzan was outlined by the etching of shadow. It was one of the forts just completed by order of the Czarina, Catherine the Second of

Russia. These forts formed a chain along the western border of the great Tatar steppe.

An earthen rampart, surmounted by a palisade, was pierced for several cannon, all facing toward the river. The center of the place was a square of beaten clay, a drill ground in the corner of which, near the gate, stood wooden stocks, a knout hanging thereon by a rusty nail.

On one side of the enclosure ran a line of barracks and stables. Clustered against these as if for protection were the huts of traders, wine sellers and smiths. Behind these sheds a glow dimmed the moonlight and loud voices broke the silence of the night. Groups of coated figures moved between the huts, swaggering out on the square.

Whenever the soldiers came near the gate side of the drill ground they hushed and walked more quickly. Here stood a rude church of logs, with a painting on the planks of the door and a weather-stained cross of silver gilt at the peak.

Beside the church and abreast the stocks was the two-storied bulk of the governor's house, its mica windows tinted with orange light, the watch-tower built up from its roof. A deep voice within roared out a song of the steppe:

> "*Shen, shen, shivagen*,
> Seize your horse and spur again.
> Ride, ride; speed and turn—
> Burn, burn!"

As Zaritzan was on the river route of the Volga, and was the point on the steppe nearest the highway to Moscow, in this building the *pristof* Kichinskoi had his quarters — Kichinskoi, nominally Great Commissioner of the Tatars, actually *surveillant* of the frontier for the Empress, an informant who had authority even over the military commanders, and whose word was law on the Volga.

Kichinskoi was in his office when Billings entered—a heavy man, with a smooth pale face and small features. He lay back on a sofa, one foot in a polished boot, on the table in front of him. He paid no attention to the captain after one swift glance, but went on talking to a timid-looking priest who sat on a stool close to the charcoal brazier.

"Old wives' tales, I tell you, my dear *batko*. There will be no rising among the Torgut Tatars. I have talked with the Torgut khan and told him a thing or two to put in his ear with the fleas. Pah! Didn't you see, Father Obe, that the khan was afraid to answer me?"

"Yes, excellency, the khan did not answer."

"Of course not."

Thrusting both hands deep into the pockets of a sable-lined overcoat, the *pristof* yawned and began to pick at his teeth.

"The Tatars are dogs. A little lashing, you know, goes a long way with them. Didn't they come to the steppe of their own accord several generations ago to beg for lands when they were driven out of China or some such thing? We need them, of course. The ministry wants horses and taxes, and the Torguts can give us both. And their khan raised a levy of forty thousand cavalry in the war with the Sultan—killed a lot of infidels for the glory of God, and we got Azov. Isn't that true, priest?"

"True," muttered the small priest, with more assurance this time.

Kichinskoi took snuff from a gilt box. Without offering it to Billings he closed the box and dusted off his chest with a silk kerchief.

"Dogs, or rather wolves," he resumed, "but we would fight them rather than lose them. I know what is whispered behind the doors of the ministry. Every house has its watchdog, Father Obe. You feed them bones—ha, yes! Our watchdogs are the Cos——"

He glanced toward the door whence came the noise of carousal and the mellow voice of the singer. While he seemed to pay no attention to Billings he was covertly scanning the visitor.

"I was going to say Tatars. Under my advice, they fight the Baskirs, Turks and other accursed savages. Dog eat dog. You take my point. I have my hand on the leash, and they won't dare to rebel, whatever fools like Governor Beketoff may say—ha, Captain Billings, what does your friend the governor say now about those pagans over the river?"

He turned swiftly on his visitor. Billings had savored how he was being received in the first moment. Instead of standing, or trying to interrupt the self-satisfied official, he had seated himself on the stool opposite the priest, had thrown open his coat and taken out his pipe. After filling this, he took his time about answering, stooping instead to draw a coal from the brazier to light his pipe.

"Beketoff," he responded calmly, "does not wag his tongue for the sake of hearing it go."

Kichinskoi brought his boot down from the table with a thump and frowned.

"Confound it, captain, you make yourself fiendishly at home, I must say. You're sitting down, I must call your attention to that. And am I smoking, pray?"

"No, you took snuff."

The priest cringed back into the shadows and raised his hands; Kichinskoi stared banefully into the emotionless, leather-like face of the adventurer. Billings' greenish eyes were frank and not at all cordial. Kichinskoi noted with some interest the smartly cut coat and the embroidered waistcoat of the captain.

Kichinskoi was a clever man, but—as is often the case—thought himself cleverer than he was. Already in the third rank of the nobility, he liked to be addressed as of the second. His weakness was vanity. He looked meaningly at Father Obé.

"Do you know, sir," the priest hastened to say, "that, Captain Billings, you are addressing the *pristof* himself? His excellency is commissioner over the Torguts, who are the Tatars along the Volga. Governor Beketoff has seen fit to send couriers to St. Petersburg—to high officials—charging that the Torguts are about to take up the sword against Christians. He asked you whether Beketoff still persists in that delusion.

"His excellency," he added in a whisper, "has denied to the Empress herself, the viceroy of the Church, that the Tatars would rebel."

"Then tell his excellency, Father Obé," said Billings quickly, "if he has brought me from Astrakan merely to repeat the confidences of Governor Beketoff, I shall make haste to return tomorrow morning."

Father Obé looked at Kichinskoi, who blinked like a disturbed owl. But, having studied the map-maker, he changed his tactics.

"By the ashes of Sodom, my dear captain, you speak our Russian language well. *Foi de ma foi!* And my inform— I hear from Astrakan that you have completed a splendid chart of the Caspian shore for my friend Governor Beketoff, who did not pay you a copeck. Also, you speak Tatar somewhat. I take it you are versed in—ah, astronomic science, and are—yes, a master hand at making a map."

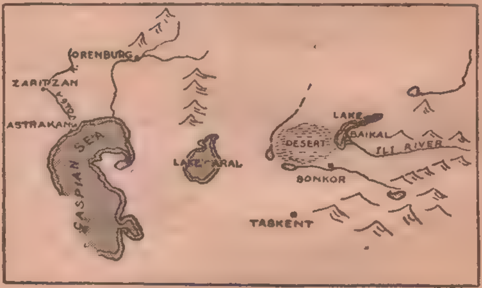
Billings bowed without answering.

"Now unfortunately, Captain Billings, our Russian cartographers have given us poor charts of the Volga and the great plain to the east. *Vraiment, mon ami!* What do you think of those charts of the steppe?"

"Hum!" Billings smiled grimly.

"Exactly. I am commissioned by the Empress herself to prepare a map to present with my report."

"A map—of what?" Billings asked.



"Ah, you perceive the point. A map, my dear sir, of the great Tatar steppe." Kichinskoi drew a paper from the pile on his desk and read from it:

> "It is desired an officer be commissioned to set out from the river Volga for the river Yaik, and from there to the Torgai. From this point he will journey to the Lake that is called Tengis, or Balkash, and he will complete a true and fine map of this territory.
>
> He is furthermore instructed to settle by astronomic observation the exact position of the Lake of Balkash, concerning which divers opinions are held. In all instances this officer is to conciliate the natives and confirm them in their favorable opinion of the Russian Government, to which they have recently submitted. By order of the Imperial Society of St. Petersburg."

"Practically the whole of the Tatar steppe," assented Billings. "Fifteen hundred miles—five thousand versts. First, plains down below sea level, then a desert—a blank place in your charts, ornamented by a picture of a tribesman sitting in front of his tent. And then——"

He hesitated. An old Armenian merchant at the Astrakan waterfront had sold him a map of the East. The traders of the caravan routes had a good knowledge of the terrane. And the Armenian had tales to tell.

"And then," prompted Kichinskoi, surprized at his visitor's knowledge.

"Mountains, *pristof*, shown on your maps by a pretty sketch of a lion emerging from a cave. But instead of lions—so I have heard—a race of men that are like animals. They bring women to sell as slaves in the bazaars of Tashkent and Bokhara to the south."

Kichinskoi frowned angrily.

"Tales—tales. My agents have provided against a revolt. Come now, my dear sir, you would be the—ah, *avant-coureur* upon the steppe that is still a blank space to us. Your name will be known by this map. Will you undertake it?"

He had spoken shrewdly.

"Your terms?" demanded Billings.

"Ah—four rubles a day while you are on your journey. Two hundred rubles when the map is approved by me."

"Four rubles—to hire horses and caravaneer's supplies?" Billings flushed.

"My dear captain! You have your own horse; and your outfit—planisphere, compass and spirit level—is coming up the Volga under a Cossack *sotnik*. Besides, what will you do if you do not accept my offer?"

Indeed there would be nothing for Billings to do but return as best he could to Astrakan and walk the jetties. Kichinskoi had heard that the adventurer was penniless and so the *pristof* offered less than he had been instructed to pay for the making of the map. It is the way of the world's officials to drive a hard bargain with him whose purse is empty. Billings had reason to know this.

Some years before he had commanded a Russian sloop that made the voyage from St. Petersburg north along the White Sea, and thence along the edge of what was then called "The Frozen Ocean" to the mouths of the Yenesei, to establish a trading-route for furs with the Mongol-Tatar tribes of the arctic circle.

The Russians bought, at very low prices, a huge amount of furs annually from the Tatar tribes—"sea otters," sables, ermin, black and red foxes. Billings knew that a large portion of the great fur trade passed through Zaritzan—the Torguts fetching the skins from the interior—and a goodly interest of the profits must stick to the fingers of Kichinskoi.

"I should return to Astrakan as soon as my luggage arrives," he responded thoughtfully. "And I should write to the ministry suggesting—as I have already done, you know—that the fur trade could be handled more cheaply through Orenburg or Astrakan than through Zaritzan. More cheaply, that is, where the officials are honest."

Again Father Obé looked troubled, but Kichinskoi managed to smile agreeably.

"On my oath, my dear fellow, I had forgotten your former services. But by the ashes of Sodom, the Empress must have her map. What are your terms?"

"Six rubles a day for the expenses of a small caravan. Five hundred rubles paid to me in advance. As much more when the map is delivered to you at Zaritzan. Also, your written promise that you will approve the chart. I want no retraction when the work is in your hands. It will be good, on the word of Minard Billings."

Kichinskoi inspected the well-kept fingers of a plump hand. His smile hid a sudden hatred for the adventurer. No one had dared to outface the *pristof* in that manner since he had come to Zaritzan. Billings, in reality, had no intention of writing to the ministry. But his shot had gone home.

"Oh, agreed, by all means," purred Kichinskoi. "—— my soul, should gentlemen quarrel over pennies? I will make up the sum out of my own pocket."

Even as he spoke he was planning to force harsher terms on the map-maker. (Inasmuch as it was learned afterward that Kichinskoi had been furnished with sufficient funds to outfit Billings and pay him two thousand rubles to boot, it was literally true that what he surrendered to the map-maker came out of his own pocket.)

Just then a house serf entered and informed the commissioner that his *matushna*—his lady—wished to see him. With a bow he excused himself and left Billings alone with the priest.

"That devil," remarked the maker of maps, "no, not Kichinskoi but the one we were talking about, across the river—you have seen him, Father Obé?"

The priest glanced involuntarily toward the door that had just closed. He had seen monks who refused to sanction the acts of Russian officials tortured in the prisons of Moscow. Even the Metropolitan of Moscow had been whipped by order of Catherine, herself a profligate woman. So he did not want to say anything that would interfere with the plans of the *pristof*.

"No," he responded. All at once a kind of flame came into his weak eyes. "But I have heard the talk of the heathen across the river. It is their high-priest who is the arch fiend. He has the face of an animal and is as tall as a tree. Our soldiers say he calls them, from the steppe. The *pristof*, Captain Billings, would save the souls of the heathen. We are sending the sons of the Tatars to our *kaleka*, our colleges, to instruct them in Christian knowledge."

"Do the sons stay in the *kaleka?*"

"You have the gift of foreknowledge. Nay, even today we heard that Alashan, the young son of the Torgut Khan, had escaped from Astrakan. A detachment of Cossacks pursued him in vain as far as Zaritzan."

Billings rose, having found out from the priest two things he wanted to know. The Tatars would be hostile to any one attempting to chart their steppe on behalf of the Russian Government. And the youth he had rescued on the post road was in all probability Alashan.

All at once he noticed that Father Obé was gasping and pointing at him. Following the direction of the trembling finger, Billings looked down. In place of his plain leather belt, he found that he was wearing beneath the overcoat a girdle of soft, red leather. Where the coat was parted he could see the clasp, a head of a wolf shaped in black iron.

"The sign of the fiend from over the river!" cried Father Obe.

IN THE dining-hall, to which the *pristoff* ushered the map-maker upon his return, the sight of Billings' belt produced instant silence. Dancers, Cossacks and women who had been flinging themselves about until the sweat flew from their faces and their hair came down—these stopped to stare and cross themselves.

Elegantly dressed under-officials attached to Kichinskoi's staff drew closer to inspect the emblem on the clasp; uncouth-looking Cossack captains drew back with scowls.

Captain Billings was sensitive, and was acutely conscious of the belt. He could not discard it—he had no other means of holding up his breeches.

Whispers came to his ears.

"The stranger has held commerce with those across the river."

"He had been tempted by the arch-fiend."

"No, a witch ran off with his horse and left him astraddle of the strap. I know that for a fact."

A giant of a man, bearded to the eyes although the front portion of his head was bald, joined Billings by the stove where the captain was warming his boots. As Kichinskoi had made no mention of meat and drink, the adventurer did not choose to remind the company that he was hungry. To eat in such a crowd was distasteful to him.

"To purgatory with Satan," growled the newcomer. Billings recognized the voice of the singer. "I am the *starshim*, Mitrassof, Colonel of the Volga Cossacks, and by the Heavens I know the different handiwork of witches and vampires. Vampires climb up behind horsemen. First they stupefy the traveler with a poisonous breath, then they suck the man's blood until he is half-drained and goes about for the rest of his life like an idiot or a cripple.

"A vampire takes the form of a child," nodded the *starshim*. "Always. Wasn't this one like a boy or girl, captain?"

"A stripling, and a rapscallion at that."

"Of course." Mitrassof pointed to the slit in the leg of Billings' trouser. "*Ai-a*, brother, you had it there. Don't you feel faint?"

"Somewhat—yes, devilishly faint."

There was no doubt about that, Billings having gone hungry since dawn.

"Well, that settles it. Within a week your limbs will begin to shrivel. Too bad, too bad. You should have dismounted at once and stuck your dagger in the ground and made the sign of the cross three times. A vampire can't stand that. He would have run down the dagger and into the ground."

"I have a better trick than that," spoke up another "When a little girl vampire out on the Tatar steppe tried to seize my leg, I cut off her head with my saber—*pouf*, like that! Then when I reined in and rode back to see if she had changed into an animal, the body was gone. It was night, a moon like this, and I heard an old woman wailing in the thicket."

"True, true," nodded Mitrassof, "Vampires are more daring than witches, every time."

Kichinskoi's thin lips wore a skeptical smile. He was sitting on a couch fitted with a silk cover. Beside him was a plump German woman, his mistress. She wore an enormous round crinoline in the new fashion and made great play with a fan.

The woman with her airs contrasted grotesquely with the bare beams of hewn pine and the tiled stove. Kichinskoi sprawled at ease, receiving compliments from his *entourage* as a prince might.

Mitrassof's explanation had cleared the air for Billings. He was no longer bothered, and a hum of voices rose, drowning the notes of a *balalaika* strumming somewhere in the shadows. Suddenly talk and music ceased.

A young lieutenant of Polish dragoons had entered, saluted Mitrassof and come to a stand before the *pristof*. Billings noticed that the nerves of the assembly seemed not of the best and that every one listened to hear what the newcomer had to say.

He had been out with a patrol across the river. He had to report that the Torgut chieftains were in council, and preparations were under way among the *yurts* for a movement of some kind. Cattle were being herded.

"Cattle?" Kichinskoi's brows went up. "You come to me with a tale that children are herding Tatar cattle? What rot!"

The Pole flushed. He was a youngster in gallant attire in damask surtout and gilt spurs, and obviously had thought he had done something well worth while.

"But it's at night, excellency. And the fires are going in all the family tents."

"Fires? You'll be assuring me next that the savages are eating breakfast."

"They are, excellency."

Kichinskoi snorted: the woman beside him hid her laugh behind a fan; the under-officials smirked in harmony. When the *pristof* set the tune it was up to them to dance attendance. Mitrassof alone became moody at the tidings brought by the Pole.

"But, excellency! That is not all. Tatar outlaws have unsheathed the sword on the Volga. A band of them attacked and slew a Cossack *sotnik* approaching Zaritzan on the ice with a sled from Astrakan."

"Your mother blessed you with little sense, lieutenant. Come! A few robbers plunder a sled—you see a rising."

A crash startled the listeners. Mitrassof had flung upon the floor the glass of brandy he was holding. His beard was bristling.

"My men slain—by Torguts! Hey, there shall be an answer for that. I scent treachery." His scowling glance swept the room and fell upon Billings. "My soldiers were convoying your instruments and luggage."

"Then, sir, they were a cursed poor convoy."

Mishap upon mishap had fallen Billings' way in the last few hours. Except the clothes he stood in and his weapon, he was now stripped of the last of his worldly possessions. Now Captain Billings was no believer in that faithless jade, Fortune. Scratch bad luck, he would say, and you find somebody's ill-will. Somebody had planned to steal his belongings.

"You say that—you!" Mitrassof's temper flared. "You talked with one of the spawn of Satan, and gave up to him your horse so that he could escape us. Eh, I can see under a haystack like this one. A Tatar rider leaves you, gives you his tribal emblem to wear."

Now the boy, Alashan, or whoever he was, must have exchanged belts with the map-maker in the darkness. Certainly Billings had known nothing of it. The death of his men had driven all metaphysical fancies from the Cossack's head, inflamed by drink.

"You have sold yourself to the Torguts, and you came here to spy upon the fortress."

Good-natured ordinarily, Mitrassof's savage, moody soul was violent when his feelings were roused. Billings could have answered that it was absurd that he should arrange for his baggage to be stolen, or to permit his own horse to be made away with voluntarily.

Instead he held his peace and glanced at Kichinskoi. It was up to the *pristof* to clear him. But Kichinskoi was frowning, his thin lips pinched together. He was not displeased at the quarrel, because the Cossack's words showed him how he might possibly humble Billings.

Suddenly the German woman, who had been whispering to the Pole, spoke up shrilly.

"A mounted patrol pursued the robbers, excellency, and the sergeant in command reports that the leader of the Tatars was riding the horse of Captain Billings. He saw the captain riding in Astrakan."

"Ha!" Suspicion leaped into Kichinskoi's gray eyes. He pondered the possibility that Billings could have been sent by Beketoff to stir up the Tatars to revolt. The suspicion died, to be replaced by a shrewd gleam of satisfaction.

Kichinskoi knew that he had sent for Billings himself, that both the captain and Beketoff were above such conspiracy; but he saw a way to gain a fresh hold, he thought, on the map-maker.

Meanwhile Mitrassof was reasoning along other lines, or rather had ceased to reason at all.

"If you were a man and not a runt, I'd teach you a thing or two with a sword," he growled.

Instantly Billings' blade was out. Twice the flat of the heavy campaign rapier slapped the Cossack's red cheeks. It stung Mitrassof to blind fury.

"To one of us, death!" he gritted, sweeping out his saber.

There was no thought of seconds, no bothering about the code of duelists. The Pole, it is true, tried to herd the fluttering women out of the room. Kichinskoi, seeing that his sofa was well out of the combatants' way, leaned forward curiously. Hitherto no one in Zaritzan had cared to match strokes with the giant *ataman.* He might still have prevented the fight, but made no move to do so.

Billings was smiling, his teeth shining under the yellow mustache. A swift, sliding thrust severed a corner of the Cossack's black beard. It was a clever trick, appreciated by the watching soldiers; and it brought a wild glare into the widened eyes of the big Cossack.

"*Akh!*" he cried. "To one of us—death!"

His saber flashed and fell, until the clashing of the two blades was merged into a single ringing grind. Billings stood close in, giving no ground, keeping the weapons engaged close to the hilts where the sweep of the saber was less potent.

Mitrassof was a slow thinker when his muscles were not in play, but he moved with alert swiftness. Springing back, he gained space for a full stroke and smote down at his adversary's head. The blow would have broken the other's blade like a wooden lath. Billings, however, was not there when the saber fell.

Consternation began to grow in the faces of the watching officers. Kichinskoi sprang up with a muttered command to stop the fight. The young Pole shook his head. It was too late.

But in the eyes of the woman on the sofa was a morbid eagerness. She was watching for the moment when one of the swordsmen would be pierced through or slashed into oblivion. So blinding was the play of weapons, she feared that she might miss the instant of the blow.

"Stop them!" cried Kichinskoi. "Or they are both lost!"

Both men were necessary to his plans.

Mitrassof was cutting at the smaller man's ribs. No longer could Billings step aside. The rapier darted at the Cossack's beard, and rasped the skin from the jaw bone.

Stung anew, the giant stepped forward, slashing without intermission. He walked across the room, literally bearing Billings down before him. Yet as he came forward the rapier caught once in his arm and again in his ribs.

Feeling his wounds, Mitrassof grinned, the blood running into his teeth and choking him. Billings halted, crouching, his sword upright; and for a second the two blades were locked. The faces of the two were not a yard apart.

A black arm caught at the chest of each man, and the priest Obé thrust himself between them, straining to push them apart.

"In the name of God, forbear!" he cried, keeping his grip with difficulty.

Billings wrenched free and stood ready to engage again.

The *pristof* hurried up.

"Quarreling in my presence," he exclaimed. "Colonel, captain, this won't do at all. Gentlemen——"

The panting Mistrassof paid as much attention to Kichinskoi as to a wandering fly. But the pale face of the priest kept in front of him.

"This is the command of the Church! Do you hear, Cossack?" There was the ring of authority in his thin voice.

Mitrassof became calmer and sheathed his saber. Scowling at Billings, he stared obediently at the priest, as a dog at its master.

"I will remember this in your favor," Kichinskoi was moved to say to Father Obé.

The priest seemed flurried by the condescension, blinked and became once more his unobtrusive self.

When the gathering left the room, Billings noticed that Mitrassof remained behind. He returned to the door and saw that the Cossack was busied rubbing a mixture of gunpowder and earth on the cuts in his jaw and arm, moving stiffly to favor the side where his ribs had been slashed.

Also he had foraged for himself some cold mutton and bread. This he began to munch while he sought for a brandy bottle that still had some liquor in it.

Noticing the adventurer, his beard bristled in a grin.

"Hey, that was a good bout," he observed. "You are the devil of a fellow to tackle."

Billings bowed stiffly, but yearned toward the cold meat. Suspecting this, Mitrassof pushed the platter toward his guest. The duel had restored his good humor and cleared his head, and he ignored his hurts. They found brandy, and Billings relaxed.

"You're a swordsman yourself, colonel."

Lifting his glass, Mitrassof bowed.

"Not at all," he muttered politely. "You are my master with the blade. Aye, you would have let out my life before I could have cut you down. Health to you."

"Health to you!"

With a nod Billings responded to the toast and fell to attacking the mutton. He began to like Mitrassof. They talked long over the bottle, and the Cossack's song was not lacking. When dawn outlined the windows, the colonel conducted the visitor to his room.

Mitrassof insisted that Billings occupy his pallet. The big *ataman* went over to some skins in a corner, flung himself down like a dog, and was snoring almost at once.

CHAPTER II

KICHINSKOI WRITES

When smoke is in the sky, somebody has made a torch.—Cossack proverb.

THE next day rumors sprang up from no one knows where along the Volga. It was whispered among the huts of the fishermen that the devil himself had been seen walking along the opposite bank, as high as the stars and with eyes that flamed like two pine torches. And after his passing a star had been seen to glow with uncanny fire in the east.

It was observed that the Cossacks in Mitrassof's command were moodier than usual, which might have meant either aching heads after a night of drinking, or a sense of foreboding in these half-wild men, who were blood kin to the Tatars.

Heedless of rumors or portents, the Great Commissioner Kichinskoi sat at his table penning a report to the Russian ministry. In it he gave the lie to his rival Beketoff's warnings concerning a revolt of the Tatars, and suggested that the eldest son of each family of the *noyons*—the Torgut nobles—be taken as hostage and brought up in Russian cities, "For these savages do seem to cherish great affection for the oldest boy in the family."

With even more zeal he composed a memorandum to the treasurer of the Empress, explaining that he had found a man who would undertake the perilous task of making a survey for a trade route across the steppe as far east within the countries of the tribes as Lake Balkash. A stranger would not be looked upon with suspicion by the Tatars, who were jealous of their rights and seemed to dislike all Russians, being under the influence of an arch-witch from Tibet, who was most likely a harmless mummer.

Kichinskoi then sent a servant to find Billings and bring him to the office. The man returned, declaring that the English captain had asked for a horse and gone off in the direction of the river. Billings had called back that he was about to look for the miscreant who had taken his luggage and horse.

"Ashes of Sodom!" muttered the *pristof*. "The fellow must love trouble." He thought for a moment. "Bring the *batko* to to me."

When Father Obé entered, Kichinskoi bade him close the door and stand against it.

"As soon as Captain Billings returns, take him my compliments and this private word:

"Complaints have reached me that he is holding unauthorized intercourse with the Tatars, especially with one who is called Alashan, the son of the Khan. Alashan is an escaped hostage of the Russian Government and the Holy Church. I have proof that Captain Billings aided Alashan to escape our hands. Captain Billings is also charged by worthy persons with possessing a talisman belonging to the pagan sorcerer of the Torguts. He is guilty of a brawl with the worthy *ataman;* in fact, even I can not prevent his being taken to Moscow and tried unless he pledges himself to a course of conduct more becoming an employee of the Russian Government. Hm——"

He considered.

"Tell him furthermore that I have proof under my hand that he is attempting to incite the Tatars to rebellion. Hint that Governor Beketoff, his patron, is in disfavor at court, whereas my star is rising. In short, *batko,* point out that if he chooses to escape jail he must show his zeal for the Empress by serving me, in the matter of the map, without any pay—no, without any money other than for his expenses."

Smilingly Kichinskoi reflected that Billings would know better than to drive a bargain with him again.

Without a word Father Obé rose and left, after murmuring his assent, Whatever thoughts came into his narrow, secretive mind, he kept to himself. After all, there was the belt.

The message was never delivered.

Well pleased with the day's beginning, the *pristof* was even more delighted when his servant announced the arrival of a delegation from the Torguts.

"Ha—that does not smell of rebellion, on my word. Well, bring my sable coat, and the sword of ceremony. Is that cursed Cossack *ataman* sober enough to walk without staggering?"

"I think not, excellency."

"Well, order him to become so. Rub snow on his bald pate and scrape some of the filth off him. Hurry. See that the Tatars keep outside the fortress. By the way, who are they?"

"A hideous creature, your highness, and Alashan, the son of the Khan."

"I expected his father. Hm. Alashan!" Kichinskoi looked pleased. "Let me see, the seven infantry regiments of General Traubenberg, and several batteries of cannon—important things, those—are within four days march, to the west. Then instruct the *ataman* to turn out the guard, with fixed bayonets. Mind the bayonets!"

Humming to himself, Kichinskoi summoned his valet and was attired in an officer's uniform, freshly polished boots, dress sword and jeweled decoration at his throat. He took snuff liberally from the imported box until he saw Mitrassof walking stiffly across the parade ground toward him at the head of a squad of Cossacks.

Although a little pale, the big man was none the worse, apparently, for blood-letting or brandy. Kichinskoi allowed him to lead the way until they passed through the gate and saw the Torguts. Then the *pristof* stepped out in front.

The Torguts were unarmed.

"What is this?"

Kichinskoi pursed his lips and signed to the interpreter.

An old man stepped forward from the small group of Tatars and lifted his hand to his bronze, bossed helmet in greeting. Short, bowed legs supported a powerful body clad in a sleeveless fur tunic. His right arm moved with a rhythm of rippling muscles.

"I am Norbo, Master of the Horse Herds of the Torguts."

Kichinskoi was looking at the slender youth beside Norbo. Alashan was brave in finery of green nankeen and red silk, of furred *khalat* and fur-tipped cap. His fine, dark eyes were alight with some kind of inward merriment.

"Great Commissioner," went on Norbo bluntly, "I have been sent to ask whether it is true that the Empress has ordered our sons to be taken away to Russia. I await your word."

To gain time to think, Kichinskoi pretended displeasure and reminded Norbo that he should have lifted his hat at mention of the Empress.

According to Mongol custom, it was an unpardonable rudeness to bare the head during a conference of state. Norbo noticed that Kichinskoi's hat remained in place.

"Nay, I shall not do it," he retorted. "The Torguts are free born. The Khan is no vassal of the Empress."

"The Khan! Your Khan will do what I tell him to. He is no more than a chained bear."

Norbo lowered his eyes and was silent, while Alashan smiled faintly, saying, "What is your word concerning the sons of the Torguts?"

Kichinskoi hesitated, for he had received as yet no authority from the ministry to act as he had suggested. He was thinking quickly, and thinking of a new decoration, prestige, influence at Court—if he guessed aright the secret plans of the great Catherine.

He made his decision and with it cast into the scales the lives of two hundred thousand human beings.

"This is my answer," he said, and ordered the Cossacks to seize Alashan. Mitrassof grew red and muttered that envoys were privileged.

"Bah!" whispered the *pristof*. "It is only an escaped student. I did not invite him here. Are you going to obey my order?"

"Am I going to obey an order?"

The colonel pulled at his mustache and looked up at the sky thoughtfully.

"When my Empress, the great Catherine, says, '*Ataman*, there is work to be done, or a good blow to be struck;' why, then I tell my children and lead them, and, God willing, they die. That is right and as it should be. When the *batko* says to me, 'Colonel, that son of a pig, the Sultan, has been tearing down Christian churches again, or roasting worthy priests of the steppe,' I get my horse, turn out my barracks and polish up the frontier a bit. My turn will come. That is as it should be.

"But when you say to these Tatar chiefs, 'Come and hold council with me,' and then order them to be trussed up and carted off, that is a different thing entirely. Give that old bull yonder, who calls himself Norbo, a sword and, if it is your wish, I will stretch him out on the ground for you in a twinkling, although I am somewhat stiff this morning. But if you want to pluck the young envoy I'll send a man to call your Polish guards to do it. That's all I will do, by the holy Faith!"

Kichinskoi looked black, but there was no help for it. He fancied that the Tatar who had named himself the son of the Khan was laughing at him. No sooner had the Polish dragoons come up and secured Alashan than Mitrassof gave an order to his men and marched off.

To the surprize of all the Russians, Norbo and the other Tatars offered no resistance as Alashan was hurried to the gate.

"The son of the Khan is the first," explained Kichinskoi to Norbo. "Later the eldest boy of each family must come to us——"

Here, to the *pristof's* chagrin, Norbo, followed by the other Torguts, turned on his heel and walked off without any leave-taking. The Russian's last words had given him the answer he sought to his question, and, being a Tatar, he did not see the need of more words. So Kichinskoi was left without an audience although he never felt more like making a speech in his life.

He was conscious of a shrewd exultation, a conviction of his own power. Had not the Tatars accepted his mandate without resistance? He felt sure that he, Kichinskoi, was playing at the regal game of empire and deciding the destiny of a people. And so he was.

* * *

IT WAS near to the hour of sunset when Billings rode a steaming horse into the river gate of the fort and asked for Mitrassof. Learning that the *ataman* was out with the mounted patrols that kept watch on the western bank of the Volga, he turned over his pony to a serf from the stables and began to walk toward the commissioner's house.

He was thoughtful, because he had had his first glimpse of the Tatar steppe, the wide plain that began at the tip of the Caspian where it was below the level of the sea, and extended to the mountains that separated China from the western world. From dawn until dark he had seen not so much as a hillock in the white expanse of snow save where the native villages huddled in the hollows protected from the wind by clumps of willows or oaks.

Billings knew that like all desert areas the plain, now ice-coated, would be blazing hot in the Summer months. Yet it was fertile, and the fine grazing was much coveted by the Torguts, who seemed indifferent to weather.

Reflecting upon the actions of Alashan, he saw now that the boy must have had urgent need of a horse the night before. And he believed—correctly, as he afterward discovered—that the exchange of belts formed part of the Tatar ritual of *anda*. He was rather skeptical, however, about the tie of brotherhood that the boy had knit between them.

As he passed the door of the church, Father Obé came out, locking it after him. Shivering, even in his heavy cassock, the priest hurried to join Billings.

"I tried to find the colonel, Father Obé," observed Billings seriously, "but I think you—as Kichinskoi's adviser—should hear my word. I have just come in from the plain. It's true as Holy Writ that the native clans are gathering. The cattle herds are being driven in from the villages to the center of each *urdus*—clan. Supplies are being packed into wagons. Yet I saw no signs of mobilization, nor any cannon.

"It is curious," he added.

"Some days ago," observed the priest, "one of my converts, a fisherman, told me that the anti-Christ across the river—the witch or fiend that wears a mask—had called together the Torgut council and urged the Khan to take up the torch and sword and lay waste all the Russian hamlets from Astrakan to Orenburg."

"Hum. And the Khan?"

"Refused. But there is evil stirring, and you do wrong to wear the sign of the fiend."

Billings fingered the leather girdle and smiled.

"If some one will be so good as to give me another belt"—He shrugged. "I'm beginning to think the road across the steppe will not be without thorns. You wished to speak to me, Father Obé?"

"I have been told—" the priest began.

"What is that?"

The moon was coming up over the walls of Zaritzan. It outlined before the Englishman the shape of a prisoner in the stocks. A big Cossack was bent nearly double, his head and arms thrust through the holes of a heavy plank.

The lower part of the man's face was stained black and glistened in the faint radiance from the sky. Billings saw that he was in his shirt, his heavy *svitza* thrown on the ground under his nose. The fellow was shivering, his eyes fixed so that Billings suspected the lids were frozen.

"A sentry," the priest explained, "who let a prisoner slip through his fingers last night, when you, captain, reached Zaritzan. This afternoon his excellency the *pristof* condemned him to have his nostrils torn and to be locked in the stocks for twelve hours without a coat."

Bending closer, Billings recognized the Cossack who had first greeted him at the gate of the fort. Even if he had retained vitality enough to speak, the frozen blood that coated his lips would have rendered the soldier dumb.

Billings would have walked on, when his own words, spoken that last night came into his mind—

"You would leave a Christian to the cold and wolves."

Billings never wasted time in cogitation. He caught up the man's heavy skeepskin coat, flung it over his back, tying the sleeves under his throat and buttoning the lower part around his hips. The stiffened eyes turned toward him gratefully.

"Tell the commissioner about this, if you want to," he growled to Father Obe. "If he objects, present my compliments, and remind him that I do not happen to be his vassal."

Father Obe glanced at the map-maker curiously.

"I shall say nothing, my son. The *pristof* gave me a message for you. You are a brave man, even if you hold commerce with the pagans. I—I shall let him deliver his message himself."

But Billings did not see Kichinskoi at dinner. Going from there to his room, or rather the one he shared with Mitrassof—for the castle was very crowded—he was surprized to find a sentry with a musket at the door. The door, too, was bolted on the outside. When Billings shot back the bolt and would have entered, the soldier motioned him back.

"I come from Colonel Mitrassof," Billings said, thinking the man was some guard of Mitrassof's.

Indeed, at the name of the officer the soldier fell back respectfully.

Yawning, Billings was preparing to take off his shoes and coat and throw himself on the cot, when he saw that it was already occupied. Alashan was surveying him with considerable amusement.

* * *

"BLESS my eyes and blood!"

Captain Minard Billings seated himself on the three-legged stool by the bed. He sat very straight, muscular arms crossed, two fingers tugging at the end of a well waxed mustache.

"You are the infernal scoundrel I've been looking for all day!"

"Where?"

"Across the river." This, Billings noticed, caused the boy to start. "Where is my pony?"

"Soon you will bestride her."

"Hum. And my luggage, pray? I have learned that the youth who rode my mare attacked the Cossacks who were with the sledge, and that Tatars shed Christian blood." The gray eyes of the map-maker grew cold. "Look here my *bopobka*, my little elf, I have had my fill of mummery. Tell a plain tale, now, and no tricks."

"Nay, Captain Beel-ing—" Alashan could never compass the other's name—"I did not attack the Cossack guard."

The brown eyes of the youth were wide and clear. His small mouth was gentle and quick to speak. Scanning the boy's olive countenance, Billings wondered if there were not Persian blood in him. At any rate it seemed that Alashan, although Tatars were usually blunt and ill-schooled at deceit, could lie like a Baskir or Persian.

"My lord brother—" Alashan had read his thoughts—"you are my *anda*. My life for yours, and one pledge for the two of us. The tie was made fast when our girdles were exchanged. My tongue speaks no false words to you. Some things I may not tell as yet. Do but have patience."

"Patience!" Billings folded his arms. "Well, my prince brother, by our *anda*, let me know this one thing. What manner of a plot are you hatching against the *pristof*, out on the steppe?"

A change came over the boy's expressive face.

"Soon the great commissioner will be no more than a chained bear. But he himself has forged the chains."

"Riddles! What are you doing here?"

"I am a prisoner, and I wait."

"For what?"

"A scourging."

Alashan related how he had been seized and put into his present quarters—the other rooms of the house being occupied by clerks, officers and friends of Kichinskoi. Billings reasoned that the *pristof* wished Alashan kept as near him as possible—a valuable hostage for the good conduct of Ubaka Khan. Also Kichinskoi could report his capture of Alashan, by whatever means, after Beketoff's carelessness had permitted the escape of the boy from Astrakan.

"He has said he will lash me," went on the Torgut, the blood darkening his cheeks, "as a lesson to the Tatars who attacked the Cossacks. Nay, they were but boys; and the soldiers fired the first shot. So the great commissioner would lash the son of Ubaka, who is the grandson of Ayuka, who was Master of the Golden Horde, child of the royal race of Genghis Khan. *Kai*—it is so. But the knout will not be laid upon my back."

"I am not sure you do not deserve it, Alashan."

"Nay, you will protect me."

"I?"

"Aye, they will come when the night is half gone. It is nearly time."

"Indeed, I will do no such thing."

Billings shook his head decisively. Whether merited or not, the whipping of the boy was beyond his power to prevent.

"You will do it. Until dawn you will protect me."

Alashan laughed merrily, and Billings was surprized because he had never known a Tatar to laugh.

"And at dawn I will ride, free, from this house and these walls—aye, though there be a great, stupid yak with a musket outside your door, and three thousand like him within call. And you will go with me, as my lord brother should."

A sound of iron-heeled boots in the passage stiffened the boy's lips. All in a moment his eyes widened, and he grew whitish around the mouth.

"They are coming with the knout, Captain Beel-ing. Hurry, lock the door."

On the doors of the *pristof's* house there were bolts on both sides for locking in prisoners or bolting out thieves as circumstances might require. Billings had already noticed this, but made no move to obey.

"You will not let them use the knout on me," persisted the stripling. "Look——"

For the first time Alashan removed the large velvet cap trimmed with fur. A flood of glossy, black hair descended upon the Tatar's slim shoulders and slipped down to the bed itself.

The olive cheeks that had been pale grew softly red. Billings knew that most of the Tatars wore a kind of long mane of hair; but this mass of curling locks belonged to a woman, and the face was that of a woman.

A rap resounded on the door. Billings glanced at the rusty bolt, and thrust out his boot against the lower edge of the door.

"Excellency," he heard a soldier say, "we will take away the Tatar prisoner, if you will have the kindness to open to us."

At the same time he felt that the heavy door was tried from without. It did not give.

"In a moment," he called over his shoulder. He looked at Alashan.

"Captain Beel-ing, I am not the son of the Khan. Do you think the Horde would give the son of a chief to another king? Nay, I am only a girl."

As she spoke she tore off the voluminous *khalat* that had been about her shoulders.

"In the name of mercy, you must believe me. My name is Nadesha, and when the order came for Alashan to go to Astrakan, I said I would go instead. I have Persian blood in me, I know the ways of the Russians, and I had wit enough to slip out of any noose they made for me."

"Agreed to that," whispered Billings. "Are you the daughter of the Khan Ubaka?"

"Nay, I am Nadesha, the child of Norbo, who is Master of the Herds. Word came to me to escape from Astrakan. God was kind. You aided me. So I made you my *anda*. Today I came with Norbo to see if that old buzzard Kichinskoi was really ordered to make slaves of the Torgut youths. It is so. You do not think I am a girl?"

Hereupon Nadesha, who had unbuttoned the cotton jacket she had worn under the *khalat*, began to jerk at the neck of her shirt with anxious fingers.

"You must not give me to the soldiers, who would strip me and take me to Kichinskoi when they find I am not Alashan——"

"Hold on! Enough!" Billings' ruddy cheeks grew redder. "I believe you."

"Excellency," came the summons from without. "Open the door and we will not trouble you more."

Billings searched the room with his glance. A collection of weapons belonging to Mitrassof had been removed when Nadesha was installed; there was left only the bed, the stool, an ikon on the wall and a miscellaneous mass of fine though soiled garments piled by the skins.

At his whispered order, Nadesha ran through this array of velvet and satin clothes, but no woman's attire was to be seen among the spoil of Mitrassof's forays. She looked at Billings, who frowned.

It was bad enough for him to be suspected of conspiring with the Tatars, without having to deal with a fair young witch. Witch! He could see Kichinskoi and Father Obe burning her, because her presence here certainly savored of magic, and it was more palatable for the official to claim that he had been bewitched than befooled.

Nadesha took matters into her own hands swiftly enough. She thrust her *khalat* into the pile of garments, took off her boots—too large for her bare feet—and shook down the masses of glossy hair over her shoulders. Then she kicked out the candle.

"Come in," she called pleasantly, no longer simulating the deeper voice of a boy.

A Cossack sergeant pushed open the door—Billings withdrawing his foot barely in time—and entered, followed by a soldier bearing a stained and smoky lanthorn.

"Come, Alashan," he growled, holding the dim light high in order to peer at the two occupants of the room.

Nedesha laughed and cracked her fingers. The lanthorn was moved over to her while the soldiers inspected her; then it was thrust about the bare room, finally coming to rest over Billings, who had not stirred.

"Where is the son of the Khan?" demanded the sergeant.

Receiving no answer, he looked under the bed upon which Nadesha kneeled, hugging her toes. Palpably, the room did not contain any one else.

The sergeant went out. Voices ensued. The sentry came in, glanced around, peered at Nadesha, searched under the bed and finally pushed his bayonet into the pile of clothes in the corner. He even lifted the skins on the floor.

Then he faced the sergeant and scratched his hair.

"I saw Alashan go in, but he is not here now."

The Cossack inspected the hole of a window.

"Large enough for a weasel," he muttered. He saluted Billings. "Excellency, have you seen Alashan, the Torgut?"

"No."

"When did this maiden come in?"

"She was here when I arrived."

This brought more bewilderment to the sheepish sentry. No one, he said, had been in the room when they put Alashan there, not six hours ago. Nor had any one except Captain Billings entered since.

Very angry was the sergeant.

"If Alashan has escaped again, you'll be eaten by the crows, and I'll have my nostrils torn."

More than a little amused, Billings listened to the debate going on between the two. The *pristof* should be summoned. No, the *pristof* was asleep and he would consign to the strappado any one who awakened him now. Well, then the officer in command of the watch. A fine thing, that—to put their heads in the noose before it was tied. Colonel Mitrassof? He was out with the patrols.

"Sergeant," observed Billings, leaning back against the wall with folded arms, "if you have finished with your questions, you might find time to reflect that an officer may sometimes desire to talk to a pretty woman undisturbed."

"Yes, excellency" The man drew himself up and saluted.

"Undisturbed."

"Pardon."

The Cossack prepared to leave, glaring about him suspiciously.

"Sergeant, for your own sake, make your report to Colonel Mitrassof and no other."

Billings listened and was sure the two remained outside his door. Although bewildered, the soldiers were not minded to release the prisoners—for Billings would now be watched. He was committed now to getting Nadesha out of this mess. Lighting the candle, he saw that the Tatar girl was curling up in the blankets, preparing to go to sleep.

"Not a bad idea," thought Billings, and sought the skins on the floor.

Although he dozed, one ear was conscious of the coming and going of feet outside the door. He had fastened the inner bolt. Presently the feet began to run through the passage; he was aware of shouts, the hoof-beats of a horse outside the house. A touch on his arm wakened him.

Nadesha had put on the *khalat* but without binding up her hair. He could see her only vaguely by the glow of sunrise through the window.

"Come, brother," she whispered.

Billings was alert at once, aroused by the tumult in the castle. Looking from the panes of mica in the window, he whistled softly.

Against the spreading crimson of sunrise in the east there rose numberless columns of smoke. The whole sky was full of these black pillars, so that the very dawn was the hue of blood. Listening to the outcry in the castle he made out fragments: "The Tatars have risen. . . . The world is burning up. . . . Where are the Torguts? Their villages are burning."

Standing tip-toe beside him, Nadesha stared at the conflagration. She uttered a soft cry, of lament or joy, he did not know which. Tugging him after her, she drew back the bolt and pushed open the door.

The sentry faced her, dull with lack of sleep, his musket at the "ready." Billings halted, but Nadesha knocked up the gun with a quick motion—she moved as swiftly as an animal—and drew from within her cloak a long pistol. Billings recognized it as his.

Thrusting the weapon into the soldier's beard, she backed him against the wall of the corridor.

"You little vixen!"

Billings caught at her, but she slipped away, running fleetly in her bare feet. The map-maker dashed after her, leaving the sentry fingering his weapon and cursing, not daring to shoot for fear of hitting the officer.

Down the passageway they went, into an empty hall and through a door that gave upon a lighted chamber. This proved to be the office of Kichinskoi, and the *pristof* himself sat at the table.

He wore a purple dressing-gown, and his hair was tousled. He was alone. As Billings ran into the room, the door was swung shut behind him and, wheeling, he saw Nadesha standing against it, flushed with triumph, a pistol in each small fist.

With her bare feet planted wide, her tangled hair falling into her gleaming eyes, the girl was a veritable wildcat. Kichinskoi stared at her with surprized anger, until comprehension came to his alert mind.

"You are Alashan!"

"I am Nadesha, child of Norbo, Master of the Herds. Listen to my word, you, who would chain the Torguts like a bear—who would eat of the fat of the bear and wear his skin to keep you warm."

She gestured with a pistol, and Kichinskoi pressed back in his chair. Billings could see the *pristof's* tongue moving spasmodically. Owing to the tumult in the castle it would avail the man nothing to shout. Nor, by the discipline he enforced among those under his rule, was there a chance that any one—except Mitrassof—would enter without permission.

Kichinskoi was cornered and he was helpless. Billings had an idea that in her present mood Nadesha would think nothing of pistoling them both.

"Blind!" the girl's cry went on. "You and your Empress would make slaves of the free born. Fool! You did not see that we will not submit. Many there were who brought the truth for your hearing. You shut your ears. Now, have you seen the smoke in the sky?"

A nod from Kichinskoi, who was gathering his wits about him.

"The Torguts are burning their villages; the bear is throwing off its shackles. We are marching—now—to the east; we are riding to our homeland. The clan of the Torguts will go back to Lake Balkash and beyond to the river Ili, where you can not follow. The Khan has chosen—yesterday—after your word."

She cast a fleeting glance out of the window that was mellow with sunrise. Kichinskoi started.

"Impossible!" he muttered. "A year's journey, and—two hundred thousand souls." His eyes narrowed. "You would be attacked by your enemies, the Baskirs and the Black Kirghiz. Why, the snow——"

He almost laughed, feeling that the girl was deceiving him.

Nadesha smiled tauntingly.

"We have chosen, *pristof*. This is my word, from the council of the Torguts. If you send your soldiers to turn us back, there will be war, and a river of blood upon the snow from the Volga to Balkash. I have said it."

With the pistol still in her hand, she raised it to her forehead and then dropped it to her lips in mock salaam.

"I could slay you, my fine boar, but you are already dead. My lord Beketoff already is driving a racing sledge to St. Petersburg with a word for the ear of your Empress that will stretch you out under the snow."

Jumping up, Kichinskoi stared at her as if Nadesha had been truly a witch.

"You see, *pristof*," she said calmly, "I have learned a lot at your school." To Billings she added, "If you want your pistols, my little *anda*, come and get them."

With that she was gone through the door as swiftly as she had come. Billings guessed that the girl would not stay within the building. She must make for the stables and secure a horse—if she could—as her best chance of freedom, before Kichinskoi's men overtook her.

Knowing better than to try to pursue her, Billings ran out of the other door, through the dining-hall and the courtyard. Behind him Kichinskoi remained pale and rigid as if he had seen his death sentence written on the wall.

Billings found the gray light obscured by mists over the drill ground. Soldiers were running to stations, Cossacks who buckled belts and slid into overcoats as they ran. From the watch-tower a bugle blared. The men paid no heed to him, or to Nadesha.

As he had hoped, the captain sighted the long cloak and flying hair of the girl disappearing into the mist. She was looking back over her shoulder. Somewhat to his surprize she was heading not toward the stables but to a gate through which horsemen were coming and going freely, men from the mounted patrols coming in and couriers going forth. The usual strict scrutiny was relaxed owing to the absence of both Mitrassof and Kichinskoi and the general disturbance caused by the conflagration.

In the shreds of mist Nadesha seemed like a floating wraith slipping over the snow. Just within the gate Billings sighted a large sleigh and recognized, by its gilded ornaments and pompons that it was the one used by Kichinskoi himself.

Beside it the young Polish lieutenant sat his horse restlessly. Into the sleigh was climbing the plump woman who was Kichinskoi's mistress. Her maid, lugging bandboxes and shawls was trying to get in beside her. Not ten feet away stood the stocks, and from the frozen body of the imprisoned Cossack, two blind eyes stared at the tumult around the sleigh. The man had died in the night.

In response to Nadesha's call three horsemen emerged from the dense shadows of the wall. They wore ragged sheepskin *svitzas* and nondescript black felt hats.

Billings, however, perceived that they were no peasants. He recognized the harsh features and immense shoulders of Norbo, Master of the Herds. Another was a youth of about Nadesha's age. The three evidently knew exactly what was expected of them.

Norbo spurred up to the Pole, who drew a pistol from a saddle holster, but not quickly enough to avoid a sweep of the club in Norbo's hand. The pistol was knocked into the snow, the Pole himself caught up, whirled from his mount and flung to earth.

Meanwhile the other two had frightened off the two grooms with a flourish of bared sabers. Nadesha, as usual, had not been idle. Seizing the maid by the shoulders, the girl pulled her back, screaming like a wounded parrot. The bandboxes flew about, and the horses attached to the sleigh began to rear.

The German woman had risen, and the forward jerk of the sleigh tumbled her back. Nadesha wormed into the vehicle and fell to rolling the frightened fugitive out of it. Norbo rode up impatiently and put an end to this by leaning over and pulling the woman bodily out of rugs and sleigh. Nadesha screamed something up at the Tatar, who turned and looked at Billings.

The captain had come to a halt. One of the Tatars, the young boy, spurred toward him. Billings drew his sword.

"Alashan!" cried Nadesha, her voice shrill with fear.

Men were running toward them. The Pole, having rolled out from under the horses' feet, was shouting for aid.

The boy who had been called Alashan did not stop. He swung his saber slowly as he galloped. From the direction of the barracks came a ruddy flash and the roar of a musket.

Then Billings heard boots thudding in the snow behind him. He could not turn, for Alashan was almost on him. Something struck against the base of his neck, and a great crackling filled his ears. A red sea formed in front of his eyes. He felt a hand catch his arm; then all was darkness.

Above the roaring in his head persisted the shrill squawking of the fat woman who had been thrown in the snow.

CHAPTER III

THE FIGHT AT UKIM PASS

Only for a moment can you say, "I am the slayer, he the slain."
The shrill joy-cries of the women at your wedding change to lamentation at your death bed.—Native proverb.

IN THE year of the Tiger, by the Mongol calendar, Alashan was seventeen years of age. This was one year older than Nadesha. But the girl of Norbo, born of a Persian mother, grew swiftly to womanhood.

Alashan was still a boy, intent on sports and leader of a gang of Torgut rascals who tended the horse herds, racing the best of the beasts almost into the ground in their pastimes.

These other boys of the Torgut nobles were brawnier than Alashan. True, he could ride with a fiery eagerness that won him races; yet in the goat *tamasha* he could not hold his own, although he rode until his lungs labored and his heart rose in his throat. The goat *tamasha*, in which each rider tries to capture and keep from the others a live goat, is a furious test of an hour or more during which clubs and cracked heads are often the lot of the contenders.

"You are worse than a hair on the eyeball," Nadesha had assured him spitefully after one defeat. "How do you ever expect to be a man and kill an enemy when you can't even keep a goat in your hand?"

Life, for the Tatar youths in the age when the great clans were still intact, was an ordeal. In the stag-hunts they had to follow the grown men, often from sunrise to sunrise, without eating and without pause except to rest the horses. The wild-swine hunts by torch and moonlight, where thickets coated the valleys, were less arduous but more hurtful. Many an overbold stripling had the calves of his leg ripped apart by angry tuskers, and some were ham-strung.

Alashan's body was more delicate, his eyes deeper than usual. He was much given to hanging around the councils of the older men, even listening for hours to the whisperings of the lama—the priest from Tibet—who was very willing to inculcate superstition and fear into the mind of the future Khan.

So it was from a two-fold fear that Ubaka, his father, had sent Nadesha in his place, disguised as a boy, to Astrakan. He was afraid the Russians might influence the "queer" mind of his son against him.

"Nadesha is more of a man than Alashan," he had said bitterly to Norbo, who, being too blunt to lie, said nothing.

The Khan was a broad man, less muscular than Norbo, more ponderous, with the strength of a bull. He was not clever, and care sat upon him heavily.

"Listen, Alashan," he had said to the boy, "to the words spoken by the All-Conquering, the mighty monarch, Genghis, who when he christened our clan, spoke in this fashion: 'You shall be called the Giants;* from birth your sons will have a sword in their hands, and they will die so; there will be no peace for you that is not won by blood and suffering. In the stars it is written you will be free men, until the hour of your passing; you are the Giants.'"

It was the longest speech Alashan had ever heard his silent father make. It lingered in his mind like the after-note of a bell.

"When you have proved yourself a man in the face of your enemies," the Khan added, "then you shall ride on my left side. Not now."

Often while he sat by the hearth in the wooden palace of his father on the steppe near Zaritzan, Alashan thought upon these words. So far, he reasoned, the words of Genghis Khan had proved true. The

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*Torguts.

Torguts had migrated westward from China to keep their freedom. For a hundred and fifty years they had fought the battles of the Russians so that they might hold the steppe upon which their herds grazed.

For a hundred and fifty years the sword had been in their hands. What now? Alashan, while Ubaka was absent on the last campaign against the Turks and Nadesha away in Astrakan, listened to the talk of the women on the other side of the fireplace.

He heard that the levies of cattle and money paid by the Torguts to the Empress were to be increased. He himself had seen the forts going up around the territory of the Torguts.

When Ubaka rode home at the head of his men, Alashan waited in vain for a word of praise or reward from the Russians, and his anger grew. Ubaka became more silent.

One day Ubaka told Norbo to send for Nadesha, and called the Torgut council together. After long talk that the boy did not hear, a rumor sprang up on the steppe.

"We are going to the home of our fathers," the elder Torguts said.

Loosang Lama, the priest from Tibet, was consulted, and approved the plan for reasons of his own. The omens were taken from burned sheeps' bones and found to be favorable for the undertaking.

Alashan was glad and hopeful. Although the weeks of preparation made the labor of the boys heavy, he looked forward to the setting out as a Moslem boy might await his first travel to Mecca. He mingled again with his cronies. They stole horses, on a dark night, from the hostile Baskirs—no easy feat, that. They dipped *kumiss* by stealth out of the big jars by the fire of their various tents and were blindly drunk for a while.

Then, to ease their spirits, they attacked a Cossack *sotnik* one moonlight night on the Volga. Nadesha put this idea into Alashan's head.

The girl had returned from Astrakan on a fine pony and with a brace of pistols that roused Alashan's immediate envy. She did not show the weapons to any one else, confiding in the boy that they were "borrowed." So was the horse, Nadesha admitted, but she let Alashan ride it on his foray. She said there was something valuable on the sledge, and she dared him to take it.

To the Tatar boys the chance of seizing a sledge bearing plunder was a fine thing. To tackle Cossacks was a big order; but on the following day they would be riding away from Volga, and without doubt they would all earn for themselves the name of warrior.

Despite Alashan's craft, they were seen by the Cossack guard and fired upon before they could approach. Keeping to the shadows along the river bank, they managed to remain out of sight until one of their number was drilled through the head by a chance bullet.

That let loose the devil in the boys, who until then had planned merely to try to run off with the sledge when the Cossacks halted to make camp. They rode their ponies out on the ice and sent arrows swiftly into the soldiers grouped by the sledge.

A musket is not so easily aimed as a bow in the moonlight. Two more boys were knocked from their horses and died soon after, but the three Cossacks lay writhing out their lives on the ice.

Without a shout of triumph, and without plundering the victims, the Tatar youths made off with the sledge and were seen climbing the river bank by fishermen roused by the shots.

"You are no better than a child," the Khan said to his son when Alashan was brought before him the next day. "*Kai*, it is so. When I would keep secret our march, you rouse the Cossacks to fury, and our foes the Baskirs you would bring upon our heels. Go!"

Alashan would not confess that Nadesha had sent him upon the Cossacks. When he sought out the girl in the bustle of their village, he found her preparing to go to Zaritzan with her father, in his stead.

"But I am not afraid," he cried.

"That is not enough."

She made a face at him, and to add to this insult took his best *kaftan*, carefully slitting the inner lining to make a place for the two pistols.

"I am more of a man than you; the Khan said it."

Nothing could have made Alashan more utterly miserable. He sat by the cold hearth of the great log building that did duty as a palace. Nadesha was fairly safe, for even Kichinskoi, Alashan thought, would not lay hand on the son of the Khan.

Then came Norbo with tidings of Nadesha's seizure. Taking pity on the boy's anxiety, the Master of the Herds allowed him to share in the attempt to rescue the girl the next morning. Nadesha had found time to whisper to her father that she would manage to be near one of the gates just before sunrise, and they had counted on the alarm caused by the conflagration to aid their escape.

For Ubaka, as soon as he heard the decision of Kichinskoi to take the Torgut sons, had given the order to burn all the Torgut villages.

"Raise the *tugh*," he gave command after seeing that his abode was fired. "We will go to our homeland."

Smoke was already rising on every quarter of the steppe; the animals were restless. But when the yak-tailed standard was lifted and the trumpets sounded, the young boys yelped with joy. They were the first to move, driving off the cattle; then came the women, on horse, with other beasts dragging the heavy wagons on which stood the skin tents.

Children raced about in the snow. Dogs barked. The *jigits* outriding shouted to other bands that appeared beside them on the white sea of the steppe. Axles creaked and horses neighed. It all merged in one vast, joyous murmur.

"The Ili!" women cried to each other and nodded as they whipped up the cattle drawing the wagons.

Ubaka Khan, grandson of Ayuka, sat with the armed men on their horses, waiting to bring up the rear. With steady eyes he was looking into a sunrise that, seen through the smoke, was the hue of blood. This ruddy glow tinged the brown faces that passed the Khan; it dyed red the tossing horns of the cattle. Two hundred thousand humans had burned their homes and were mustering for a march in the dead of Winter over one of the most barren regions of the earth.

Even the trampled snow was a crimson sea. Smoke hung above the moving shapes like a shroud—a pall that disgorged black cinders and ashes. Ubaka Khan had never seen such a sunrise.

Behind him there was the sound of a soft, chuckling laugh. He turned in his saddle to see the immense, emaciated form of Loosang Lama at his elbow. The man's countenance was hidden behind a lacquer mask, half-animal, half-human. A loose robe of the most vivid yellow hung slackly from a bare left shoulder, exposing the half of a wasted body, marked by knives and disease.

"It was your word, my Khan," whispered the priest, "that sent them forth. Do not forget."

CAPTAIN MINARD BILLINGS had been struck by the butt of a musket at the base of his skull, so that he lay long unconscious, heedless of his surroundings. When he opened his eyes—it hurt him to move them—nightmares were still racing through the back of his brain.

"Ferried across the Styx, by Jove! Lying in a cave with the shade of Hephæstus. Looking out on the procession of the lost and damned, at last."

He rolled his eyes to encompass the other side of the cavern-like abode.

"And that wench Circe sitting yonder with her court of beasts, poor gallants like me, egad! More of the beasts, horned and hoofed, laboring in front of the cave—brimstone in the very air."

At this muttering the figure of the woman rose and placed a cold, wet cloth behind his head and another over his eyes. Her hands were quick and tender, and smelled somewhat of cows. Billings subsided.

When he woke from a long sleep he was shivering. It was colder than Hades had any right to be. When she rose from her corner to lay another sheepskin over him, Billings recognized that Circe was Nadesha, wrapped in a white *kaftan* made of the soft bellies of foxes. He saw too that Hephæstus was merely the grim and grotesque man who had led the rescue of Nadesha—Norbo, as he learned later.

The Master of the Herds was pounding at a steaming sword blade, on a small anvil. On a stone hearth between him and Billings a fire roared, filling the tent with smoke. Huddled as far as possible from the fire were a half-dozen odorous sheep. The tent, made of deer and ox skins, was stretched over alder poles, the whole being mounted on a crude wagon drawn by ten brace of oxen.

Billings groaned and shut his eyes. This was no nightmare. He was stiff and weak, and shooting pains ran up into his skull, but his brain was cool. Nadesha surveyed him with all the insolence of ownership and made him drink some mixture in a bowl—mare's milk and wine, seasoned with sugar and pepper. He coughed and swore under his breath.

"So," she exclaimed angrily, "you let a milk-guzzling boy and a Russian yak stretch you full length in the dirt. Pah, I am ashamed that I took such pains with you, my fine captain."

"I did not expect an attack from the castle. Who knocked me down?"

"As I said, a Russian soldier. He ran out from Kichinskoi's door. When Alashan and Norbo had hauled you into the sledge beside me—and what a mess you made of Alashan's blue!—I heard the *pristof* himself call out for his men to take you prisoner. Alashan cut down the man who hit you, and we got away with only a little fighting because the mist was still heavy on the river, and the patrols thought it was Kichinskoi's fat woman in the sledge.

"*Kai*, you stupid milord, Kichinskoi would have made of you fine bait to drag across his trail. True, he hired you to make him a map, I have heard it said. But now his own bones will be summoned to the Empress' rack, and he would have said that you conspired with us and he caught you, and perhaps they would have pulled your joints apart instead."

It was significant that Nadesha thought of the Russian Government in terms of the knout and the strappado and the rack.

"Was that why you carried me off, Nadesha?"

"Partly. I want you to do something for me, too. You must do it."

"Hum. Seems to me I'm always doing something for you, Nadesha. Where's my pony that you promised me? Confound it, you've got my sword now!"

He had just seen it, hanging, with the brace of pistols, on the tent wall over Nadesha's corner.

"You are my *anda*, Captain Beel-ing. I keep the weapons or they would be stolen. Here is your pony."

She pulled back a segment of the skin wall, a kind of adjustable window, and Billings saw his horse in a small herd driven beside the *yurt* by a Tatar rider.

"Here are your treasures."

Like a magpie with a cache to be exhibited but not touched, Nadesha flitted over to where she had made a temporary couch—Billings was occupying her own bed. Throwing aside the skins, she disclosed a number of bags that Billings recognized as those containing his personal kit, his spare stock of paper, powder and tobacco. Also the sandalwood box in which he kept an astrolabe, spirit level, compass, globe, dividers and rule—all his paraphernalia for observation and drafting. Nadesha had been using it as a pillow. Billings grunted with joy and then winced with pain because he had moved.

"What do you want me to do?" he muttered.

"You are a prisoner," she assured him. "This morning thirty Russians blundered into our line of march and were slain because the Cossacks are following and our men were frightened. Where we are going we can take no Christians. You would be left for the wolves if I did not take your part. Do you understand?"

Billings understood very well, but said nothing.

"I want you to make a map," declared the girl.

He waited.

"Is it true, my *anda*, what men said in Astrakan, that you can look at the sun and the stars and take your instruments in your hands as a lama takes his bones and prayer roll, and tell on what spot of the earth you stand? Eh?"

"It is true."

"Then you know *tenni-kazyk*, the polar star, and *jitti karaktchi*, the great bear, and all the others. You can tell what lies ahead and on each hand, just by looking at the sun and the stars."

"True."

"*Kai*—that is wonderful. Then you must draw a map of the road that we take. It was for that I brought you here."

"Where are you going?"

"To the lake that is Balkash, from which the river Ili flows."

Billings looked up in surprize. This, then, was the route that Kichinskoi had planned for him. The map was the one he was commissioned to make.

"Then make the map, and watch always if we are journeying truly toward Balkash. If our march turns aside, tell me of it. But do not speak to any one else, or Ubaka Khan himself could not save your life."

Now the Armenian merchant of Astrakan had described to Billings the location of Balkash, which was known to the caravans, as the lake was large, a sort of landmark of Central Asia. The caravan routes from China to Russia passed along it, and, turning south, those to India and Tibet.

"I shall need accurate information brought in daily by riders who have been out to the north and south," he hazarded.

Nedesha clapped her hands.

"Verily, our line of march is wide, very wide, so that the horses can all graze under the snow, and fodder for the cattle can be had. The Torgut clans stretch to the north and south ten miles, and outriders go twenty more on each flank. Some hunters, questing for game, go much farther. Aye, they shall bring in reports to the Master of the Herds. I shall arrange it."

"And what is your part of the bargain—my *anda?*" he forced himself to ask.

"First promise you will make the map, and tell me if we turn away from the road to Balkash."

"So long as I am with your tribe, I will do it."

"Good. Then I can promise that when we reach Balkash you will be set free with horse, weapons and goods and followers to take you where you wish." Seeing the man's face set stubbornly, she added: "Captain Beel-ing, you are in the heart of the Tatar Horde. If you escaped from this clan—the Wolf clan of Norbo—you would have to pass through a score of others on the steppe. Then you would fall into the hands of the Cossacks and be taken before Kichinskoi, who sent a soldier to strike you down before his gate."

Billings said nothing. He knew as well as Nadesha that the frightened *pristof* would leave no stone unturned to avert from himself the deadly anger of the Russian Court at the loss of the Torguts. A good case, as it happened, could be made out against him. Billings had no friends to use influence on his behalf. Mitrassof might speak a word for him—but Mitrassof was, if Nadesha's information proved correct, now in the field against the Torguts.

In common with Kichinskoi, Billings did not believe that the great tribe could escape beyond the reach of the Russian armies. By the time they were headed off and turned back to the Volga, Billings might be able to communicate with Mitrassof, if he stayed with the Torguts. He glanced around the dark tent, odorous with smoke and sheep, and set his teeth, resolving at the first opportunity to seek word with the *ataman* rather than endure months of this prison on wheels. Meanwhile, he would work at his chart. It would give him something to occupy his mind.

"What makes you think," he asked, for this puzzled him, "that your Khan and his riders may turn aside from the road to Balkash?"

Nadesha glanced out of the opening at the entrance of the *yurt*. No one was at the front of the wagon. She had fancied she heard a slight movement near by. Leaning her dark head close to the prone man, she whispered: "From here to the river Yaik, and from there across the steppe to the great river Torgai we know well the way. Beyond there we have only the tales of our fathers and the wisdom of Loosang, who knows all things, who came from the temple of the lamas in the mountains to the south of our road. I have heard old riders of the steppe say that devils are in those mountains—devils with faces of beasts who fall upon the caravans and carry off women such as I."

A shadow crossed the girl's face.

"*Tchu*—I fear to go among the long, cold mountains. I want to go to the river Ili where the sun smiles on the hot grass."

Billings laughed at this child-like confidence, but Nadesha looked up with a start. She had heard the flap of the tent that served as window drop into place. The strip of skin was still moving. Darting to the entrance, she crawled out, to spring to the ground and look about. She saw only the herd of horses and its driver.

On the other side of the *yurt*, his teeth set and his eyes savage, Alashan spurred away, plying his whip as if one of the thousand devils had climbed up behind him. Nadesha and the son of the Khan had been betrothed in childhood. The bride-payment had already been added to the herds of Norbo.

Unless one of the two fathers should declare Alashan unworthy of the bargain, the beautiful girl would belong to him. Now he had seen her black head pressed against the yellow mane of the *giaour*, the outlander. He had heard talk in the *yurts* that Nadesha had made the stranger her *anda*. He had come to ask the girl whether or not this were true. What he had seen would lead Alashan inevitably to fight Billings and if possible to kill him.

NOW, when the chains of Winter were tightened upon the steppe, all life, human and animal, crept out of sight. The cold was intense, although the sky was clear and the sun's touch fell full on the deep blanket of snow that it could not soften.

In the fir belts, animal life kept together instinctively—elk, and the following wolf packs that ranged from forest to river. Even the rivers were motionless, ice-coating their surfaces. Yet across this frozen world moved a black river. It was a stream of fur-clad humans, and as village after village was met with and the smoke of them left behind, the column grew to an army, the army to a horde.

The sound of it became a never ending mutter, compounded of the groaning of hard-driven beasts, laboring wagons and toiling men. And this muttering horde of men, going as no people had gone before, was unwonted. It broke, as one might say, the chains set about the steppe; it challenged the wilderness. Before it, as if in mute evidence of this, the elk herds, the wild swine, even the panthers fled out of its course.

But behind it the wolf packs began to gather, tearing to pieces the cattle and horses and sheep that fell by the way.

"A whole people has gone mad," men who had come to look at the moving columns from a distance said. "They will go to their graves like beds."

Others, Cossacks examining the trail of the Horde, pointed out the forbidding signs of hoof marks mingled with the tread of human feet and the black embers of fire in the isolated hamlets the clans had passed over.

These Cossacks of Mitrassof, as well as the Polish regiment, were closing in on the Torguts. The head of a viper, cut off from the body, still retains its poisonous fangs: Kichinskoi, in the last agonies of mortified conceit and dread, had ordered Mitrassof to take up the pursuit of the Horde and to cut to pieces any clan that refused to return with him to its residence on the Volga.

Shortly thereafter the doors of a prison cell closed on Kichinskoi, and before the end of that Winter he died. But Mitrassof had his orders, and he carried them out. General Traubenberg also was moving across the Volga with a heavy force of infantry and artillery; but unlike the Cossack he took his time prudently and when he did come up, it was upon the scene of the disaster at the Ukim.

Although the Horde made the distance from the Volga to the Yaik, three hundred and fifty-odd miles, in ten days, Mitrassof caught up with the rear guard of two clans on the near side of the Yaik.

Carrying out his instructions, he attacked the Yeka Zukor clan when it refused to surrender to him, and his veteran cavalry swept over the Tatars of that tribe. Disheartened, the other clan gave up and returned to the Volga.

This defeat caused the Horde, which had counted on a week at the Yaik to rest the beasts, to move forward again in spite of the loss of nearly half of their cattle from overdriving. Ubaka Khan had no means of knowing how near the main Russian army was to Mitrassof.

The Cossack colonel was a born leader of cavalry, and he saw his chance to deal a second blow. Ubaka was heading for the Torgai, more than a week's march. To gain the river he must cross the Mugojar Mountains, and for the space of some two hundred miles north and south there was only one suitable pass for a multitude. This was the Ukim Pass.

Mounting picked Polish cuirassiers—the armored ladies, of Tatar description—on camels and sending with them his own advance guard, Mitrassof gave orders to press ahead with all available speed, to gain the Ukim, where a few hundred men could hold the gorge against as many thousands. Drawing reinforcements from a Cossack post on the Yaik and patching up his wounded as he went, Mitrassof came after his advance, circling the Horde.

And then the steppe called a halt. Snow set in, and a storm kept Cossack and Tatar alike in their tents.

* * *

THE storm had driven the Torguts into shelter, and Billings was working at the outline of his map, sketching from a week's observation. He had stretched a square of scraped leather over a wooden frame and was laboring under a single candle, when Nadesha slipped in, shaking back the drift from her hood.

The yawning man servant who stood guard over the weapons of Norbo and Nadesha blinked as the girl moved into the light and studied the parchment over Billings' shoulder.

"They are coming to slay you," she observed. "They say they will rip the skin from your body and put it upon a *tugh*."

She turned and gave a quick command to the Tatar, who stumbled out of the *yurt*, wide awake for once. Billings laid aside the dividers in his hand and looked from Nadesha to the sword and the brace of pistols hanging over her corner.

"Do not think of that, my *anda*," she smiled, following his eye. "The long pistols will go off twice—*pang pang*—and then you might draw your sword, the one that you cherish. They would pull down the tent and drag you out by your feet and trample you."

"Who are coming?"

"A crowd of fools who are beside themselves because they have been swallowing smoke and listening to the talk of Loosang. My father is away at the *sarga*—the council called by the Khan. The mob has had no toil today, so they have guzzled kumiss and their ears are open to evil. They want blood for the blood the Cossacks have shed, and Loosang has told them you are a spy. The lama has seen you making calculations with the needle that points always toward *tenni kazyk*, the polar star."

Billings wiped dry the goose quill he was using as a pen. Then he covered up his map. Since the fighting on the other side of the Yaik he had noticed that the Tatars no longer treated him with indifference. They had grown morose, and those who observed him walking among Norbo's henchmen spat and muttered to each other. Norbo himself was moodier than usual. Men and beasts were hard-pressed. The Tatar boys had lashed the cattle and goaded the oxen to make them keep up, and each day thinned the herds. Occasionally he had seen bodies, twisted and frozen in the snow. The dogs no longer ran barking beside the wagons. They gathered in packs and fell upon the cattle that could not keep their legs.

Nadesha's eyes, half-veiled under long lashes, looked down into Billings', and her full under lip thrust out disdainfully.

"Come, my gallant captain, are you thinking of the thousand men in Norbo's *urdus*, and the thousands that are like hungry wolves as far around you as you could run in a day and night?"

Even at night the Tatars kept fires burning at the limits of each *urdus* and mounted patrols held the space between the clan camps. The storm might hide him, but he knew that no man would live long afoot in the icy wind and the snow flurries.

Billings picked up his sword from Nedesha's corner, tested the blade between his fingers and smiled.

"Better this than the storm."

Nadesha glared, and her tongue had not been silenced in the least.

"Dog! Mud-puppy! Son of a sow! Have I brought you here when you ought to have had your neck broken with a rope? *Tchu!* Have I teased that old fool my father until my jaws cracked, just to have you turn into a— Put that blade down or you'll have your breath out of your body."

Seeing that her words were unheeded, Nadesha's tone changed.

"The men who are coming are common, black-boned louts. I can handle them until Norbo comes. I have sent the servant for him. *Kai*, if you do not believe me, watch! Oh, you are stupid!"

But no consideration would induce Billings to lay aside the sword. He had not recovered his strength, yet the feel of the hilt in his hand was a tonic. A murmur penetrated the tents, the sound of low voices, the clink of steel and the creaking of leather on wooden saddles. Horses seemed to be surrounding the *yurt*.

Billings listened indifferently. He heard the murmuring come close to the wagon, caught voices outside the tent entrance. After all, it was good to face these savages sword in hand and not skulk like a sick woman, behind a tent.

A hand swept aside the flap covering the entrance, a hand upon which jewels shimmered in the faint candle-light. A puff of snow sprinkled the floor. Other hands ripped open the whole front of the *yurt*, and Billings saw a score of men armed with spears and swords, their faces hidden in hoods coated white by the storm.

Nadesha sprang forward and tossed back the cape of the leader. An exclamation of surprize parted her lips as she saw a long, olive face with a trimmed beard and eyes as dark as her own.

"So," she cried, "Zebek Dortshi, chief of the council and *noyon* of the Red Camel clan of Irak calls at the house of Norbo with armed men at his back! So, while Norbo is at the council, you have come by a dog's trail to his house."

The Persian Tatar motioned her back. Billings saw that his outer coat was velvet embroidered with gold, his belt set with turquoise and sapphires. He was a tall man, so that his eyes were on a level with Nadesha's waist.

"*Temou chu*, dwell in peace, maiden."

Zebek Dortshi pointed at Billings.

"We have come for that son of a witch. We have no thought of harm for the child of Norbo."

If the *noyon* was taken aback at seeing Nadesha in the wagon he concealed it. But the girl had not looked to find a noble in the crowd. She knew that Zebek Dortshi was in Loosang's favor and as head of the council, was second to the Khan in authority in the Horde.

"Shall I tell Norbo that you called for his prisoner without first asking the will of the Master of the Herds? He holds this officer for ransom."

Zebek Dortshi flushed, and Nadesha pressed her attack on his weak point.

"Does the *noyon* of the Red Camel clan steal like a Kurd? Or has he the command of the Khan to tear down the tent of Norbo?"

"I came from Loosang, spit-fire. He wishes the *giaour* slain."

"Oho—and has Loosang said aught to the Khan?"

She had him, but the crowd behind the noble was growing restive.

"That dog is a magician!" some one shouted. Others took up the refrain. "He has bewitched our cattle. Look, the yellow pig has a sword! Let us cut him open, sister, and to the devil with gabbing about prisoners."

From this Zebek Dortshi took his cue. He opened his hands and shrugged.

"You see, Nadesha, this is not my affair—the men want the stranger's life."

Real scorn curled the lip of the girl.

"These are your men, my *noyon*. When you came wooing me you did not say that you were their servant."

"It is the will of Loosang, the lama of the Tsong Khapa."

"A beast in a mask!"

Nadesha stamped a booted foot, and a growl issued from the throng. The priest came from Tibet, wore the yellow robe and the black hat of a *chutuktu*, a disciple of the Dalai Lama whose kingdom comprised the whole of Central Asia. The Tatars, knowing little of religion, respected the Dalai Lama as a matter of course. They had a whole-hearted dread of the mysteries of the priests of the long, cold mountains.

"The time will come," the girl protested hotly, "when you will know that you have been sheep, following a jackal who wears a sheepskin. *Ai-a*, you are stupid sheep!"

Nadesha caught the gleam in the Persian's brown eyes and checked her words.

"This man is my *anda*. See, he wears my girdle."

Throwing open her *kaftan* she allowed them to see Billings' plain leather belt with the silver clasp wound around her waist.

"It is the law among the people of the tents—two pledged brothers have one life. If you slay the yellow-haired one, I will die with him. Neither brother abandons the other."

From the outskirts of the throng a figure hooded and cloaked pushed forward to a position close to the wagon tongue. The Tatars, intent on the astonishing confession of Nadesha, did not pay attention to the newcomer. They craned forward, each one anxious to see for himself the two belts.

Zebek Dortshi ran his fingers through his soft beard and his eyes narrowed. He was the most far-sighted of the leaders of the Tatars. He was ambitious, a reckless leader of horsemen in battle, admired for his wildness by these riders of the steppe.

A match with Nadesha had long been in his mind. He coveted the warm fairness of the maiden. She would, out of all the Horde, be a fitting match for the chief of the Red Camel clan. She had wit, fire; she was no sluggard, to be hugged and forgotten.

And now she had named as her pledged brother a foreigner, a Christian and impecunious prisoner. Zebek Dortshi knew there must be a reason for this. He thought she loved the Englishman. Speculatively the *noyon* glanced at Billings, who stood quietly, resting the tip of the rapier on the floor of the *yurt*. What kind of metal was in this man?

"You are a child, Nadesha." Zebek Dortshi's brow cleared. "And a child at play. Only between men is the *anda* tie knit, among the people of the tents."

"*Kai*, is it so? Then watch if this be play!"

She drew from her belt a curved dagger and flourished it in his beard.

Among the followers of the *noyon* there was hesitation. All knew that Norbo would take immediate and bloody revenge for any injury to his child. They knew, likewise, that if they rushed the prisoner, Nadesha would probably be severely hurt, if not killed. She might even kill herself—there was no telling what a woman would do.

Just then, while they muttered and fingered their weapons, Billings took matters into his own hands. He had had enough of talk—wrangling that he barely understood.

"Come," he said to Zebek Dortshi in broken Tatar, "and taste a sword. You are dogs, that bark at a girl and run off from a weapon."

Zebek Dortshi decided there was good metal in the prisoner. But the words released the floodgates of Tatar fury. Men clambered past the Persian, thrusting against one another, shouting hoarsely. Billings caught Nadesha's arm as she would have hurled herself against the invaders. He whirled her back of him to the floor.

The first man to gain his feet within the *yurt* held no weapon. As he stepped under the candle on the tent-pole, he threw back his hood and faced about.

"Alashan!" cried Zebek Dortshi, and shouted to his men to hold off.

The boy's thin face was strained and his eyes glowed. He leaned down to twist the dagger from Nadesha's hand.

"I will deal with this man," he said passionately to Zebek Dortshi. "Call away these dogs and be gone."

Although he was half a head shorter than the tall *noyon*, his anger made the Persian shrink back a little.

"I am the son of Ubaka Khan," he went on, "and I will attend to this one whom Nadesha calls *anda*. I will face him fairly and kill him with my own hand. Tatars, this is a vow. You will see it fulfilled, aye, and soon. Now, get to your horses before Norbo's men cut your hearts out."

Flinging down the dagger, he clenched his fists, looking up from face to face as if marking those who were present. Zebek Dortshi trembled with fury, and was pulled back by his men, who had heard horsemen who were entering the camp.

"*Norbo—Norbo!*" cried the girl. "It is Nadesha!"

As the Master of the Herds strode forward alone, the men of Zebek Dortshi gave back, pulling their hoods down as if not eager to be recognized. Norbo climbed slowly to the floor of his *yurt* and looked about him in silence.

"The Khan of the Red Camels has come to pay his respects to me," said Nadesha quickly. "With a score of armed men he came, to take the one that is my prisoner, the *giaour*. He entered the *yurt* and Alashan stayed him."

Norbo's seamed face was emotionless. One of the older Tatars, of hereditary rank, he had not prospered in Russia and the more versatile khan of Irak had been raised above him.

"*Noyon*," he observed at last, in a rumbling voice, "you have a stick in your hand."

It is an unpardonable offense for a guest to enter the tent of a Mongol with a club or weapon of any kind in his grasp. Zebek Dortshi was thoroughly angry, but he was discreet. Chewing at his beard, he sheathed his sword and bent his head very low, mockingly.

"Take heed, O master of the house, lest one day your seat in the council be vacant."

As Norbo said nothing more, the man of Irak beckoned to Alashan.

"Come, puppy—they growl at us."

But the boy raised his hand in greeting to Norbo.

"May the road be open before you, Master of the Herds. I go!"

When the old khan had saluted Alashan, the boy left with Zebek Dortshi, without glancing at Nadesha, who looked at him long and curiously as if seeing him for the first time.

"Faith," muttered Billings, "the old chap treats me like a scab on the arm and the boy has promised to kill me, but I rather think they saved my life."

THAT night they ate heartily, for Norbo announced that Ubaka Khan had ordered most of the remaining sheep and cattle to be slaughtered, as the beasts were dying fast. While the snow endured the Torguts were to feast, against the beginning of the march. Nadesha disappeared into her corner when the bowls of cabbage and mutton and of fermented mare's milk were removed, leaving Norbo squatting by the fire, fingering an empty pipe.

Lying on his back, Billings studied the play of shadows on the wall of the tent, but when he started to pull the heavy skins over him, as the chill crept in over the floor, he hesitated. Finally he rose and offered Norbo tobacco from the pouch that he had cherished.

The Tatar grunted, sifted the black, Russian tobacco in his gnarled fingers and filled his pipe without a word. After Billings had warmed his feet and hands at the flames and was returning to his bed, the khan spoke.

"Keep that stick in your hand, *giaour*, and sleep upon it. There are dogs about. You may need to use it."

Until then Billings had wondered how long he would be permitted to retain his sword, for he knew Norbo must have noticed that he still had it. Following the old man's advice, he thrust the blade in its scabbard well down among the skins and rolled himself up for the night.

Turning over presently on his elbow at a sound from the hearth, he found that Norbo had secured the sketch that was the beginning of his map and had turned it to the light. The scalp-locked head of the Tatar was nodding over it.

"Well, he knows good work when he sees it," thought Billings drowsily.

In reality Norbo had fallen asleep sitting up and was utterly indifferent to the map. Through the closed flap of the *yurt* there came the clang of a brazen basin—the gong that marked the hours for the camp. It was answered by the distant blast of a horn. Norbo raised his head inquiringly, but the trumpet was that of the lamas.

Presently the Tatar began to snore, with a sighing sound like the sucking of the wind in and out of the tent. From Nadesha's corner a murmur merged with the note of the storm. The girl was crying softly, her arm pressed against her mouth so that she should not arouse the two men.

THROUGHOUT the ten days of feasting while the snow lasted Alashan kept to himself. When clear, frosty weather set in, he waited impatiently until the wind died down and the drifting of the dunes over the steppe ceased.

The dawn trumpet of the thirteenth day filled him with a glow of eagerness. He was to ride with the advance guard of the Horde that would make forced marches to the Ukim Pass. They would try to gain the upper gorge before the Cossacks; if the Cossacks were there first, there would be fighting anyway. This was what Alashan longed for.

He would show his hardihood in battle, and Ubaka Khan, his father, would declare him a man, with all a *noyon's* estate. Then and not until then could he challenge Billings, the tow-headed Christian officer, to a combat with swords. The captain, Alashan knew, would refuse to match weapons with a boy. In imagination, when he could not sleep, the son of the Khan pictured his curved sword biting into the stalwart neck of the stranger.

What tormented him was the favor shown by Nadesha to Billings. When Alashan thought of her looking at Billings and smiling at the quick, Russian words of the stranger—words that he did not hear—his heart pounded and his teeth drew back from his lips.

So he urged his camel up with the scouts of his company. His father had placed him with the captain of two hundred musket men, mounted on picked Bactrians. Zebek Dortshi commanded five hundred other musket men, veterans of the war with the Turks, and the Persian had gone ahead somewhere to the right of Alashan's detachment.

Behind the two camel corps rode a regiment of mounted infantry, followed by the nucleus of the Khan's heavy cavalry. These were soon lost to sight in the rear.

Outriders informed the Tatar captain that the Russians were pressing forward rapidly from the north.

"It is a race for the rocks of the Ukim, my young kinglet," he confided to Alashan. "Aye, the power of the gods of the high places must aid us. If the Cossacks and the armored ladies reach the Ukim first they can hold the gorge until tribes hostile to us come up the Torgai from the south and reinforce them from behind. Aye, the Muscovite regiments are marching after us with cannon and can join battle within a week if we do not force the pass."

"Then we will be the first," shouted the boy. "Come, we must ride during this night."

"And kill our camels?" grumbled the captain. "Do you want your father, the Khan, to come up and find us standing like trees in the snow? *Tchu*, my foolish bearlet, he would have me flayed alive on a wooden ass for that, I assure you."

Nevertheless, the Tatar set such a pace

that Alashan was stiff from exhaustion and cold by the breaking of the fifth day, when they sighted the heights of the Ukim against the gate of the rising sun.

By then they had lost all touch with Zebek Dortshi, who seemed to have vanished into the hollows of the steppe. Alashan fretted himself by trying to make his beast race ahead of the others, and a dozen times he fingered over the priming of the heavy pistol he had at his belt.

His young eyes were keen, and before noon he made out that mounted men were moving within the black sides of the gorge. He saw that the Ukim Pass was like the neck of a squat bottle. Only at the summit of the pass were the sides of the gorge precipitous; along the main slope, a wilderness of rock, shot through with outcroppings of pillar-like basalt, stood on either hand amid a scum of bare tamarisks.

Alashan's first thought was that Zebek Dortshi had beaten him in the race to the Ukim, and he gritted his teeth. The cavalry on the slope below the pass were mounted on camels and seemed to be awaiting their approach.

"The gods are kind!" he cried suddenly. "It was well I made gifts of gold and Russian money to the priest Loosang. Those are the Poles. I see the sun on their breast-pieces and their long lances."

The Tatar chewed his mustache and squinted. Four—six hundred men in the pass, he reckoned. Why, by the white horse of Kaidu, had they not gone higher where they would have the cliff on either flank?

"Their beasts are tired. Aye, some Cossacks on horses are with them. The Cossack cavalry must be close at hand, and these fellows ahead have counted us. They wait on the slope instead of the gorge because they expect aid before the sun is much higher."

A murmur of assent from the Tatars close by greeted these words. Their own mounts were stumbling and groaning; they did not relish facing the heavy sabers of the Cossacks. Out of the corners of their bleared eyes they looked at Alashan. What would the son of the Khan do?

"Come, my brothers of the tents," shrilled Alashan. "We will strike the ranks of our foes like a thunderbolt; they will fall beneath our swordstrokes. Their camels have gone farther than ours this day—they barely can stand. Let us ride them down!"

Instinctively he exhorted his men. His brain was in a whirl. Never had Alashan ridden into the shock of battle; his limbs quivered, and his lips twitched. His eyes were glued on the horsemen above and ahead of him who sat waiting in ranks like sitting wolves.

The Tatar captain glanced around hoping to make out some trace of Zebek Dortshi's command. There were no other tracks to be seen in the snow; but his keen eye caught a light in the weather-hardened faces of his men. Fatigue had vanished.

"Let us ride after the boy," they said, one to another. "He is a falcon of the eagle's line. He is not afraid of the Cossacks. They are many—we will go from this spot up into the gate in the sky, over the mountains of Natagai where the *tengeri* ride on the wind. That is good."

Only the eyes of the captain were troubled. When the opposing groups halted, at the distance of a bowshot, to revile each other and pick out an opening for attack, Alashan's blood began to hum in his ears.

If only the thing would begin! The sweat was running down his legs; he feared every moment his camel would bolt, or he would disgrace himself in some way.

His men were shouting guttural challenges at the splendid-looking Poles, calling them hired women and blood-sucking insects, and steel-bedizened jezebels. The round-faced Poles did not understand, but the Cossacks flung back fitting answers.

"Ho, gutter-bred thieves—mud-puppies—sneaking sons of dogs—turn-coat infidels who run from a good, Christian sword——"

Crash! A burst of musketry from the Russian ranks emptied some of the Tatar mounts and sent the hot blood into Alashan's burning eyes. He did not notice that the answering volley of his men went wild for the most part, that the Tatars followed their *noyon* up the slope in scattered formation, while the disciplined Poles kept well together.

He felt his teeth chatter together, saw his companion, the old captain, shoot an arrow into the beard of a short Cossack, only to be struck from his horse by a back-handed blow from a huge soldier whose open coat trailed after him like a cloak as he cast himself into the Tatars, hewing forward and back and roaring even after arrows stuck out from his ribs and arms.

The giant was finally brought down by the fall of his pony, and sat down in the snow with his head bent while his shaking hands fumbled for the ikon under his shirt.

The snapping of pistols sounded far off. Alashan came out of his stupor with a jerk, and was mad with rage on the instant. Tugging at the nose cord of his beast, he almost ran into a boyish-looking Pole who cast a lance at him. Alashan pulled the trigger of his pistol and saw the other's surprized face staring at him out of a cloud of smoke.

Without waiting to see if the Pole fell off his camel, the son of the Khan sprang down and secured a more agile mount, a riderless pony. The red mist was still before his eyes as he dashed here and there, striking and parrying.

Meanwhile the fight had dissolved into group combats, in which the Tatars were outnumbered and cut down rapidly, being unable to inflict serious damage on the armored Poles. Only the natural agility of the steppe riders and the deadly use they made of their short bows kept up the semblance of a struggle.

Half of them had their wish, and went to the land of Natagai, which is in the sky, behind the flaming gate of the northern lights.

Alashan halted, perforce, seeing no foes before him. He had come through the ranks of the Russians. A louder crackling of muskets caused him to stare to either side.

From behind boulders and tamarisk thickets Tatars were firing down on the Russians. They were advancing coolly down the slopes of the gorge on foot, kneeling to fire.

Alashan blinked and wondered if he were dreaming. Then he made out the brilliant figure of Zebek Dortshi sitting his horse on a summit nearby. When he shouted orders to his lieutenants, the *noyon* took a pipe from between his lips. Presently he raised his voice to call to the remnant of Alashan's men, bidding them withdraw a short distance and form again. The red cleared from Alashan's eyes. He felt the sweat, now cold on his limbs. Another was giving orders to his men.

The death of the Tatar captain had left Alashan in command of the camel corps, or what remained of it. He knew Zebek Dortshi must have seen him, and yet the *noyon* paid no attention to the boy, who was cut off from his own following.

Anger quickened Alashan's pulse; and he wheeled his horse, heading back toward his men. He went for them direct, on a course that took him through the scattered groups of Poles and Cossacks, who had been thrown into confusion by the fire of the Tatars in their rear.

This uncertainty saved Alashan his life. While some Russians were turning, to try to gallop up into the safety of the gorge, between the lines of Zebek Dortshi's musket men, others were still facing the Tatars below them.

Alashan cut off the head of a Polish lance, aimed at his ribs, and broke his sword in the man's back as he passed. Dodging here and there, he edged through the Cossacks, who would have given more heed to the unarmed boy if they had known that here was the son of the Khan.

Reaching his followers, who greeted him with an exultant shout, Alashan led them up the slope again. But the fight at the mouth of the Ukim was about over. The camels of the Russians were giving out, and stretched themselves groaning on the frozen earth while their riders were cut down by Zebek Dortshi's men, now mounted again. The Cossacks tried to rush the rock nests and the tamarisk, and most of them were picked off by bullets and arrows.

Seeing that only a handful of Poles remained, standing back to back using their light lances as spears, Alashan left these and rode up to Zebek Dortshi triumphantly. The Persian Tatar was still on the summit, looking out over the plain. Alashan noticed by the tracks in the snow that the *noyon* had brought up his men quietly, on foot, into the thickets, coming in from either flank. The camels had been herded some distance in the rear of the rocks until it was time to mount.

A suspicion came to Alashan that the *noyon* had been among the thickets for some time, that Zebek Dortshi had been the first on the scene, arriving from the south, his approach concealed by the foothills of the Ukim.

"Where were you, *ahatou*—brother?" observed Zebek Dortshi indifferently. "I could not see you at first. Why, in the name of a thousand devils, did you try to ride through the whole Muscovite strength? If it had not been for the fire of my men you would have been hunted like a hare!"

It occurred to Alashan if Zebek Dortshi had noticed his feat, the *noyon* must have caught sight of him before then. If so why had not Zebek Dortshi called to him, or sent men to protect the son of the Khan? But Alashan was too pleased with his first battle to wonder about things. He had reined his horse through four hundred foes! He had killed his man more than once and broken his sword into the bargain!

Moreover he was sure blood was mingling with the cold sweat on one shoulder, and a piece had been slashed out of his boot. He gazed at that boot proudly. Then he gave a cry.

"There are men on the plain. They are fighting."

Zebek Dortshi looked at him sidewise and rubbed the gold-inlaid hilt of his sword.

"*Chu*, my gamecock, did you not see that the main force of the Cossacks had come up below us, and the heavy cavalry of the Khan, your father, close on their heels?"

He considered Alashan for a moment.

"Here, take my horse. It is a Turkoman and fresh. Bear the tidings to your father that I hold the gate of the Ukim. You will see more fighting down there——"

Waiting for no more, Alashan was off like the wind on a lean pony whose silver-inlaid saddle was covered with a fine silk cloth. In this way did Zebek Dortshi gain credit for giving the son of the Khan his horse during a battle. And the *noyon* remained alone in possession of the coveted gorge of the Ukim.

Alashan passed groups of Tatars moving slowly over the plain, binding up their wounds and looking at weapons they had captured. These were the horsemen of the Bear clan, heavily armed and wearing chain mail over their leather tunics. Their heads were covered with pointed steel caps and their black faces were scarred. They were the heavy cavalry of the Horde, the pride of Ubaka Khan.

From one of them, a commander of a hundred who was known to him, Alashan learned that they had come up in time to engage Mitrassof before the Russians could reach the shelter of the Ukim.

Mitrassof's need of haste had brought his men up in scattered detachments; the weight of the Polish dragoons had exhausted their horses.

"They fell like ripe wheat," grunted the Tatar. "The Cossacks were a sword of another edge. They were too few. You see some of their bodies here. The heads of others who were late in coming we cut off back there."

Listening, Alashan heard firing off to his right, to the north. Edging over that way, he found the lighter regiments of the Khan, riding down the fragments of Mitrassof's command. More riders were coming up from the Horde constantly.

"*Hai*," laughed the boy, "they did not live long to boast about the Yaik."

The battle on the plain was about over. But some distance off he heard the clashing of weapons. A vibrant voice floated out, seemingly from the steppe itself. Alashan reined his horse toward the sound. He arrived at the edge of a gully where the stony, dried riverbed was littered with corpses. Several blue tops of Cossack hats were to be seen in the center of a ring of a mounted Tatars who pressed them back toward the bank of the ravine.

Alashan heard the voice again, wild and exultant.

> "*Shen, shen, shivagen,*
> Swing the steel, swing again!
> Ride, ride, to our play,
> Slay, slay!"

Shadows, gathering in the gully, concealed the outlines of the fighters, but Alashan watched the flicker of swords, heard the moans of men who had fallen underfoot and listened to the deep voice of Mitrassof making mock of his enemies. The Tatars drew back at last, and some one called for a bow.

Mitrassof was alone, half-standing, half-lying against the snow on the bank, his hat fallen off, his big head lowering on his shoulders. Alashan spurred down the slope of the ravine. A bow twanged, and after a moment the Tatars rushed in to seize spoil from the body.

"Peace, dogs," cried the boy. "This is the Starshim, the chief of the Cossacks. Let him have honor."

Unheeding, they tore away belt, sword, gold-chased scabbard, rings and the gold chain from which hung the ikon. Alashan lashed them with words, and, as they were moving away, one turned back and laid the chain with its cross on the body of the Cossack.

Then the others stopped, and presently all the spoil was returned to the body, which at Alashan's direction was picked up to be carried before Ubaka Khan.

The Khan was not found until his tent was pitched that night and he rode in, during a tumult of nakers and trumpets, to throw off his steel cap and sit by the fire. Alashan waited until Ubaka had inspected silently the body of his enemy.

After that Ubaka called for food, and the boy stood until his father had eased his hunger. The Khan had not eaten for two days. Alashan was quivering with desire to pour out his story of the fight at the gorge. He wanted, too, to point out that Zebek Dortshi had been first at the Ukim but had waited until Alashan attacked before entering the battle.

Ubaka sat gazing into the fire, his knotted hands resting on his massive knees. He lifted his head and looked at his son.

"I have been to the gorge of the Ukim. I have heard the tale of the skirmish. Zebek Dortshi, who is a leader among a thousand, I have rewarded with fox skins and inlaid daggers, with pieces of red leather and saddles sewn with pearls that we took from the Cossack camp. He did well."

Alashan's heart sank, and he waited for a word concerning himself. Ubaka was pleased with the daring exhibited by the boy, but his hoarse voice was gruff with displeasure.

"My son, a soldier can be reckless and as foolish as a *kulan*, a wild ass. But a leader of men must think wisely when the sword-strokes begin. You are not yet a man arrived at man's estate."

Alashan, too, began to study the fire.

"The time is not, when my *noyons* will lift their hands to their eyes and say that you are a true son of the Khan—a falcon of the eagle line. I have spoken. Go!"

In the tent of Norbo, Nadesha came to Billings bringing the news of Mitrassof's death, and the capture of the Ukim. With the words of the girl went the last hope of rescue for the Englishman.

Billings thought this over far into the night, and fell to work on his map with new vigor, noting in the location of the Ukim.

IV

THE WOOD ASHES THAT TURNED INTO A TREE

IT WAS an evening early in Spring and the odor of wet marshland was in the air when Nadesha slipped past the tents of the wolf clan and made her way toward the one spot of the camp that was forbidden her. This was the *yurt* of Loosang.

Ever since she had been a child—not so long ago—the girl of Norbo had longed to see inside this solitary wagon tent that was fashioned of purple cloth instead of the usual felt or hides and stood on a brightly painted cart. From its depths she often had watched the lama emerge clad sometimes in yellow, sometimes in purple with a scarlet scarf and the cube-like black hat that stretched his naturally great stature to more than the length of two Tatar spears. She had listened with awe to the note of the lama's trumpet that could be heard half an hour's ride away. Sometimes she fancied the eyes of the priest had dwelt on her.

But this night Nadesha planned to gain entrance to the *yurt*. She would match her wits against the lama's, and try to learn what the servant of the Dalai Lama had in store for the Horde. For now the Torguts had left behind the part of the steppe known to them and were nearing the edge of the unknown spaces where Loosang must guide. In a bag she held the last of the heavy Russian money, copper and silver, that still remained in their household. Now that the ground was soft under foot, at the edge of the high steppe of the Kangar, all superfluous weight was being cast from the loads of the Horde.

And Loosang had declared that this money, useless now to the Tatars, was welcome in his *yurt*, useful in his ceremonial. He pointed out that by the favor of Bon and the gods of which he was priest, the Tatars had overthrown the Cossacks at the Ukim and passed the terrible Torgai safely on a floating bridge of bundles of giant reeds.

On her way to the lama's wagon, Nadesha wheedled more copper coins here and there in the groups that clustered together on the wet ground.

The *yurt* of Loosang stood alone at the end of a red clay gully, and within fifty paces of it Nadesha was set upon by savage dogs that ripped her skirt and would have tasted her blood if a huge voice had not called them back from the tent.

Nadesha advanced, laid her bundle on the wooden platform and kneeled against the wagon tongue until from the corners of her eyes she saw that the bundle had disappeared. Still she waited.

"What do you wish, daughter of Norbo?"

"I am cold, *chutuktu*, and there is a fire within. I have brought you a great deal of money."

As she spoke Nadesha shivered, because she half-believed the dogs would be set upon her, and the dark gorge was not a pleasant place.

"Have you a message from the Khan or your father?"

"Would a *noyon* send speech by a woman?"

"Wait, then."

It was quite dark before Loosang opened the flap of his tent. The girl's quick ears had caught the clink of coins. She wondered what Loosang did with the Russian money. He did not carry it along with him in the wagon, which would have been burdened by the extra weight. The Tatars were sure of that. They believed the coins disappeared during the ritual of the lama. Nadesha wondered.

When she climbed through the opening she gave an exclamation of surprize. A small fire glowed on some stones with a reddish hue. From it came a sweetish odor from some dried roots. Behind the fire sat what seemed to be a painted statue, draped in a yellow cassock, with waistcoat of cloth of gold, and purple apron. A high hat gleamed with lacquer work above a mask-like face.

Nadesha knew that still greater emotion was expected of her, and she pressed her face to the floor, clasping her hands behind her black coils of hair. Loosang's eyes scanned the slender shoulders of the girl, noting her supple arms and the smooth skin of her neck.

"You did not come hither to sit by a fire," he said slowly. "I have been expecting you. Sit by my side and speak when you are ready."

There were cushions near the lama, and Nadesha felt very comfortable. Her cheeks had fallen in a little from hunger and her eyes were overbright. She had put on a chaplet of pearls and a silk coat and washed her skin in oil and rose water.

"If I wished it," Loosang observed, "you would not leave the tent on your feet, and the dogs would soon make of you a thing of knitted bones. Two moons ago you went against my will when you saved the *giaour* his life. Why did you do that?"

"I am holding the captive for a price."

"It must be a big price. The day after Zebek Dortshi attacked the *giaour* you sent your father to Ubaka Khan. Norbo asked the Khan to declare to the Horde that the life of your captive must be spared. What is the price?"

"Protection for me."

"From whom?"

"From the gods, and especially Bon."

For some time Loosang gazed into the fire, occasionally placing upon it another root or stick of incense wood. When he spoke his high voice was tinged with suspicion.

"What makes you seek my protection, daughter of Norbo?"

Nadesha was aware that she was being studied covertly. She cradled her chin in her hands and pouted mischievously.

"*Kai!* Are not the gods greater than the Khan, who is a man?"

"Truly. Ubaka Khan has caused much suffering among his people. Seventy thousand souls have gone out, like candles in the wind, since the march began. In each family one lies sick. The wolves and the vultures follow the trail of the Horde. Many more will die."

"Of course." Nadesha nodded confidentially.

"Food and fodder are at an end. The clans hunt and pillage as they can. The men of the Khan's own cavalry are murmuring." Loosang knew that Nadesha was shrewd; he had watched the girl and found her to his liking. "So you think the day will soon be at hand when you must seek aid of the gods?"

"Aye," the girl answered. "The day will come, within this moon that is now new. Then the Horde will cross the Kangar Desert; at the end of the desert they will turn to you to lead the way. Whither?"

Loosang felt a sting of suspicion. But the girl at his side was open-eyed, and her brow was without guile. Still, he answered craftily.

"Whatever will happen is the will of the gods. For nine days I shall sleep, and my dreams will search out the far places of the spirit world so that I may know what is ordained." Loosang thought for a moment. "If the *giaour* is not given into my hands by Ubaka Khan at the end of the sleep evil will come against the Horde. Aye, for one thing—" his hand caught the girl's wrist—"Alashan will be slain by your prisoner."

Nadesha tossed her head.

"My thoughts are not for the son of the Khan."

"Nor for the lion-haired *giaour*."

Here Nadesha took refuge in a smile. Instead of finding out things from the lama, the secrets of her heart were being probed. When the Persian Tatar smiled it warmed the blood of men, for her lips were a lure.

"True, my lama."

No more. But the smile and the words kindled the imagination of the priest.

"Nor do you love the Persian khan, Zebek Dortshi, daughter of Norbo."

"Again, most true. Though Zebek Dortshi will fly higher and faster than Alashan. A noon ago at the Ukim the *noyon* schemed so cleverly that the son of the Khan was within a sword's edge of being slain. Is it not so?"

Suspicion having passed from the mind of Loosang, he did not deny this. Nadesha half-caught her breath, for Alashan had told her about the act of Zebek Dortshi at the gorge and her wit had penetrated its motive.

"It is you, little dove," he whispered almost to himself, "who will look down upon a kingdom at your feet, and your petal-fingers shall play with jewels."

His long hand went out and touched Nadesha's forehead. It was as if a snake had crawled across her face, but she did not move. Only when the hand crept down to her throat and lingered on the vein of blood that was like a pulse, she spoke.

"I could love one greater than the *giaour*. At the end of this moon I will deliver my prisoner to you."

"*Tahil-tebihou*—the bargain is struck."

"Then where is my kingdom?"

Throwing back her head, the girl laughed softly at the surprize of the priest.

To play on the fancy of Nadesha, Loosang described to her the temple of Bon that stood at the edge of the Kangar upon a wide river that flowed down from the mountains of Tibet—the house of Bon, where the face of the great god peered out from the cliff itself, and monks, both men and women, passed their lives at the palace of the god.

They who gave up their souls to Bon, the Destroyer of earthly things, would taste paradise. In the place of their worship were paintings as old as the memory of man. The floors were jade, covered with silken rugs from Bokhara. The masters of the monks were warriors who wore gold and scarlet and carried standards as tall as the trees. Jewels were in their saddles, for they were servants of the Dalai Lama, who was the living Buddha, reborn during three times three thousand years.

And the master of the lamasery——

"I am *chutuktu*, abbot, of that lamasery which is at Sonkor, on the edge of the Kangar. And I have been lama of the Black Kirghiz, the greatest of the Tatar tribes of Asia."

So spoke Loosang, his breath warm against the hair of the girl. He had the gift of making others see clearly what he painted with words.

"When I ride back to Sonkor the *sakyas* will carry candles before me on the terraces. A *chutuktu* is a prince, for the Dalai Lama is a king. I shall go back—" just for a second he hesitated—"when my work here is done."

This time it was Nadesha who leaned forward to feed the fire. A startling thought had come to her, and she wished to hide her face. If the lama should guess what was in her mind, she would not see the light of the next sunrise, nor would the Master of the Herds know what fate had befallen his daughter, for Nadesha had come secretly to the *yurt* of Loosang.

Even as she bent down she was seized in an iron grasp and pulled back so that she lay across the knees of the priest. The face of Loosang had changed, as if he had put on one of his masks. His small eyes burned.

But it was passion and not suspicion that had stung him to seize the girl. So Nadesha saw in a flash. Yet his touch upon her neck and shoulder brought the color flooding into her cheeks. She twisted in his grasp, whipping out a knife from her *khalat*.

Before Loosang could move, she had placed the point of the curved dagger against his throat and pressed it in a little. The lama snarled angrily as his head, perforce, bent back. Then the knife was withdrawn and he saw Nadesha sitting beside him quietly, the dagger secreted again.

"You are a fool and a child!" he ejaculated, the harsh Tibetan accent creeping into his words. "No one has drawn steel against me, who can not be hurt by steel."

The girl reflected that he seemed unwilling to put the matter to a test.

"No one has laid hand on me before

this," she responded calmly. "Now it is in my mind that you lied to me about the kingdom of Sonkor where the Kirghiz are——"

"Lied? I?" Loosang, for the first time, was answering blindly the thrusts of the Tatar. He laughed shrilly. "Nay, your own eyes will see it. I will take you there."

"That is part of the bargain."

"Good. It shall be done, and sooner than you think."

For his part, the lama had tasted a little of the beauty of Nadesha. Now he meant to possess her. In this he could be patient. As for Nadesha, she had had a vision of a great doom preparing for the clans, for the Wolf clan and her father and the Khan. It was no more than a vision as yet, a mingling of the power of Loosang, the power of the Black Kirghiz, and the wiles of Zebek Dortshi. She felt as if she stood at the edge of a pit that was being dug.

But there was nothing that she could say to Norbo. There was only one thing to do—to be taken to Sonkor and there to learn what truth was in her fears. So, to this end, she prepared to play her part. She even thought of the curious disappearance of the money that had been brought to Loosang.

Her own bag was visible in a corner of the *yurt*, but the store of coins that had passed into the hands of the lama was not to be seen. Evidently he had disposed of them in some way.

Meanwhile the lama had bent his head to one side as if listening.

"I hear the voices of the council, the *sarga* of the Torguts, that is assembled in the tents of Ubaka Khan," he said. "They are cattle, those ancient ones of the Horde who bend the head to Natagai."

"True," assented Nadesha, wondering what he was leading up to.

She had known the council was in session to debate a message received from General Traubenberg, who was pursuing the Horde. The Russian offered pardon to all clans that would turn back with him to the Volga. So this night the issue must be decided, whether to press on to the Ili or retrace their steps to the Volga.

Seeing the hunger written in the thin cheeks of the girl, Loosang handed her a bowl of sweetmeats.

"The Khan is still as great as the lama," observed he dryly. "He is a yak, but the herd follows its leader. So—I hear his words:

" 'My brothers of the tents, we are knit together as flesh with bone. Where one clan goes, all must ride. Or we shall be dust before the wind? Who would be a slave?' "

Loosang mimicked the slow, heavy tones of the Khan and threw his voice so that it seemed to come from the tent top. The girl ceased eating and waited anxiously.

"Ubaka is saying that at the end of the road ahead lies the valley of the Ili where are the graves of their fathers. There the gate in the sky can be seen, and the souls of the old Torguts may look down upon them."

"And what is the will of the council?" asked Nadesha, nibbling again at a date.

"Wait! And you will hear with your own ears."

Loosang motioned her back into the shadows behind him. Nadesha heard a small bell tinkle over her head several times. Soon came a footfall outside and a voice familiar to her.

"Norbo, Master of the Herds, is here to speak with the *chutuktu*. The *sarga* seeks the wisdom of the priest."

It occured to her for the first time that Loosang had a watcher posted outside the tent in the shadow of the side of the gorge and that this man warned Loosang by ringing the bell of the approach of others. She smiled at the way her father clipped his words. Norbo had no love for Loosang, who opposed the old traditions of the Tatars cherished during the long stay in Russia.

Loosang, the priest, made a sign for Nadesha to remain quiet, where she could not be seen.

Norbo sat just within the *yurt* entrance facing the fire.

"Ubaka, our Khan," began Norbo bluntly, "has spoken in council. He says rightly that we should seek the skies of our old home. So does Zebek Dortshi say. But many of the *noyons* are wavering. So the vote was to send for your word."

Plainly the old chief did not relish his mission. The lines in his leathern face were deep as he scowled at Loosang through the heavy smoke.

As Loosang kept silence, Norbo repeated surlily.

"To press on, or turn our horses' heads? What is your word? For my part I follow Ubaka to the Ili with my clan."

The hand of the priest scattered more roots thickly in the fire.

"Look!" he croaked suddenly.

The glow of the flames died and a swirl of gray smoke swept up. Out of the smoke a stunted tree took form. Nadesha could even see branches in the semi darkness.

She caught her breath and looked again. The tree was standing there, upright in the coils of smoke. Then a flicker of fire crept up, blazed, and the likeness of the tree was gone.

Norbo glanced up at the ceiling, then at Loosang and bit his mustache.

"Go!" ordered the priest. "Say to the council you have seen an omen."

"What means the omen, *chutuktu?*"

"This. Out of fire and smoke will grow up the rooftree of the Torguts. The clans must go to their own land. I will show them the way."

Norbo's shrewd eyes snapped.

"*Ai-a*, that was the word of the mighty Genghis. It is a good word."

When he was gone, Loosang rose and stretched, chuckling to himself.

"You have heard, my little owlet. The lion asks counsel of the leopard. The lion thought he was strong and swift, but the steppe is wide. Oh, the steppe has a voice and a lure. It is like a fair woman. Men give their lives up to it. Now the lion limps, for he is lame—lame."

While speaking he walked slowly to the side of the hearth by the open flap, tossing upon the embers some brown powder he had taken from his robe. Again a thick smoke came up to the tent top where there was not the customary air vent. Nadesha choked.

Suddenly she sprang up with a cry. The fumes were strangling her. She started to run past the fire, holding her sleeve against her mouth, but Loosang thrust the girl back. Wavering, she sank down to the floor, her eyes closed, her lungs laboring. The lama, standing in the fresher air, coughed, and presently stepped outside, drawing shut the flap behind him.

Still muttering to himself, he hastened to the gully behind the *yurt* where his two disciples had been busied during the greater part of the evening. They had built up a shrine of stones, in which were stuck sticks bearing shreds of rags. It was customary with Loosang to mark in this fashion the places where his *yurt* had stood.

Now when he came to the pile of rocks the lama placed therein the bag of money Nadesha had given him and watched while the two men covered it up with more stones.

"For him who travels in the desert," he laughed quietly, "a landmark."

V

LOOSANG SLEEPS

RAIN was falling thinly as the Master of the Herds rode to find the quarters of his clan. The sky was broken—a cloudy dawn.

Norbo's powerful arms swung against his hips. Dried blood had stiffened one side of him, where shoulder and hip had been cut open by an enemy's sword. He had not eaten for two nights and a day, but tied to the peak of his wooden saddle was a hind quarter of an antelope, given to Norbo by a hunting party that he had met coming in from the marshes.

The old chieftain rode with his head raised. He was looking for the fires in the sky* that he had heard were to be seen above the valley of the Ili.

Very tired was Norbo, and he felt he would like to ride up into the gate where the souls of the elder heroes would come to meet him and all would have horses' meat and drink. He had been near to the gate that night, for the Baskir tribesmen had attacked the rear of the Horde in force.

Picking its way among huddles of soaked men and women, who lay sometimes half-submerged in water, the pony by instinct sought out its own clan. Norbo remembered a dawn last Winter when he had passed by such silent groups, among them the body of his sister. The Tatars had frozen when fuel for the fires had given out.

"By the mane of my grandsire," he growled under his breath, "there is one who lies at ease."

His eye had lighted on the *yurt* of Loosang. Nearly all of the Torguts' wagons had fallen to pieces or been broken up for firewood; Loosang's was intact. The lama had given out word that he was about to sleep, in a trance, for nine days. During the nine days no one was to come within a spear's cast of his *yurt*.

Two disciples of the lama, armed, kept watch by the carved and painted wagon.

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* The northern lights.

Norbo saw that a flag of yellow silk flapped above the wagon shaft. It was a prayer flag, and it had been hoisted when Loosang went into the trance.

His own *yurt*, together with that of the Khan, having been split up to be made into fresh spear hafts, Norbo's camp consisted only of a felt tent before which a half-dozen ponies stood obediently. He dismounted stiffly and splashed through a puddle, to peer into the entrance.

"Nadesha," he summoned, "I have meat; cook it. The clan must go forward within an hour."

Instead of the girl Billings crawled out of the tent. His cheeks were pinched but shaven clear. After drinking from a bowl that had stood outside during the night, he offered it to the *noyon* without result and then emptied it over his head.

"Nadesha has not been here for a day and a night, uncle," he drawled.

Then after shaking the water from his hair and rubbing it from his eyes he set to work with flint, steel and a pinch of powder to ignite some dry leaves and twigs he had kept dry in his blanket.

This done, the two men gave all their attention to nourishing the flame, first with broken pine branches, gathered during the last day's march against the possibility of food to be cooked, and then with damp birch sticks culled from a near-by thicket.

As the crackling grew, the smoke thickened and the odor of sizzling meat spread in the air, men came to stand and look at the two. Norbo, who was gulping down his portion half-scorched, motioned them to come and partake of the meat.

"A plague on these savages," muttered Billings, cutting himself off a piece and roasting it on his long knife. "Raw or seasoned, 'tis all the same to them, and as for salt——"

With a sigh he contemplated his ragged garments, neatly sewn in a dozen places, and glanced over the plain of high grass, muddy and treacherous as a bog.

"Who among you has seen Nadesha the last day and night?"

Their faces, black with exposure to the sun, smoke and grime, were expressionless. They had not seen the girl. Her pony, though, was missing from Norbo's herd.

"She chose her horse, yet took no weapons," Norbo grunted, frowning.

By noon he had no word of Nadesha. It was strange that the girl could have gone off from the clan in the center of the Horde without being seen. Billings, too, was thoughtful. He remembered that Nadesha had, when he last saw her, warned him to keep near to Norbo until this moon should be at an end. A blare of powerful horns caused him to glance up. The *yurt* of Loosang was approaching, rolling over the uneven ground, escorted by the two young priests, both armed. The yellow flag snapped and fluttered.

Billings watched it pass and kept his horse standing after Norbo's cavalcade had passed on. He was allowed to do pretty much as he chose in these days of mutual suffering. Riding alone, Billings had espied Alashan.

"Dwell in peace, brother," he smiled as the boy came up. "I have a word for you."

Alashan glanced at him coldly, but reined in and the two rode on in silence after the joggling cart.

"Nadesha," observed Billings, "has vanished. She is no longer in the Horde."

"And you?" The boy gritted his teeth.

"I am her *anda*. You are her betrothed. Good. This is a dark matter. I smell treachery, and so I would speak to you, as her brother."

Alashan became grave.

"You speak fairly. Do not forget that I have sworn to lift my sword against yours, until one of us dies."

"Meanwhile, Nadesha. The daughter of Norbo has been to talk with Loosang, not once, but several times. Now she is gone and the lama is not to be seen. No other Tatar, I think, would harm Nadesha. That is my word."

"What says Norbo?"

"Naught. But he is troubled."

"Then I will have speech with these snakes, and learn what evil Loosang has put upon Nadesha."

When Alashan spurred up to the sacred *yurt*, Billings was close behind. As the boy came within a spear's throw of the wagon one of the disciples wheeled his horse.

"Back, Tatar! Away from the dwelling place of the lama whose spirit is with the living Buddha in the sacred city."

Alashan however kept on; and, his pony being the heavier, the *gylong*, the young novice, staggered aside, his loose lips shedding a venomous flood of curses. A second disciple, portly, and uncomfortable in the rain, faced Alashan from under the shelter of a purple canopy, held by two servants.

"Rascal unsanctified!" he bawled, taking care that his voice should carry to groups of herdsmen who had halted to watch the scene from a distance. "Ubaka Khan will set thee on a stake for this——"

Recognizing Alashan, the novice blinked, and his fat cheeks twitched.

"Is Loosang within?" demanded the boy calmly.

"The *chutuktu's* body lies in the tent. In Sonkor, where he was abbot——"

"Stand aside. I would speak with the lama."

Such presumption made the pseudo-priest gape. His eyes grew round. All at once his stout body quivered. Snatching the umbrella from his attendant, he struck at the boy, who took the blow on his arm and reached out with his other hand. It closed on the crystal rosary the other wore, and he twisted it tight with no gentle touch. The mouth of the *gylong* opened wider and his eyes bulged.

"Harken," hissed the boy, "keep silence if you would not wear a noose instead of a rosary."

With a parting twist Alashan released the *gylong*. But the man was too startled to be reasoned with. As the boy jumped from his saddle to the wooden steps leading up to the front of the wagon, the fat fellow began to bawl again, sounding indeed very much like a cow.

As the son of the Khan raised the covering over the entrance, Billings saw the other *gylong* slip up the steps. The disciple had drawn a knife from the wide sleeve of a cassock. Billings had anticipated amusement, but matters were growing serious. He reined his horse up to the platform and caught the wrist of the *gylong*. A heave of the shoulders and the man was jerked back, to fall into a mud puddle.

Meanwhile the yelling of the fat disciple had brought the watching Tatars nearer. A glance showed Billings that they were from a clan unknown to him, and even in his rage the *gylong* had been careful not to mention the name of the son of the Khan.

The behavior of the two convinced Billings that Alashan had stirred up a hornet's nest. Drawing his sword, he swung from the saddle to the platform, shoving off the frightened servant who had been holding the reins. Alashan had disappeared within the *yurt*, and Billings was wondering what the boy had seen. But by now the herdsmen, convinced that something was very wrong, were beginning to run toward him. They shouted, brandishing knives and pikes.

Not so long ago Billings had encountered such a mob. He realized that Alashan had gone too far. With the fat priest crying them on the Tatars would probably beat him to a pulp before they listened to any words from the boy.

Gathering up the reins in the hand that held his sword, he plied the whip that had been resting against the tent. Loosang's horses were well fed, and there were six of them. They lurched forward into the traces. Before the wagon could gain headway a pair of lean herdsmen leaped to the steps and lifted their pikes. Billings dropped the reins and was about to thrust with his sword, when he saw the two hesitate and lower their weapons.

"The wolf of Nadesha!" one of them cried.

They were looking at his belt. But Billings did not wish to be taken in hand, belt or no belt. He shouted to the herdsmen to give back and lashed out again with his whip. The horses broke into a trot and then to a jerky gallop. The two invaders dropped off.

Others, spurred on by the *gylong* who urged his horse frantically after the wagon, were running behind the *yurt*. A clamor of angry yells rose above the creaking of the axles and clattering of the wooden floor. The yellow flag whipped in the wind; the streamers snapped out from the eaves of the purple tent. Dogs barked.

Grinning, Billings plied the whip. It occurred to him that Loosang might emerge from within, and he kept a wary eye over his shoulder while he guided his imposing chariot along the muddy plain. He could make out two ample piles of skins, the beds of the disciples. Also a wine cask and an array of foodstuffs, all jolting about. A bell was ringing violently.

The tent bellied like a sail, and the front portions were torn loose from the floor pegs. From this aperture Alashan peered.

"By the mane of the white horse of Kaidu, what has happened?"

Taking in the situation, he smiled and beckoned Billings. As they had outdistanced the pursuers, the map-maker brought his steeds down to a trot and tied the reins to a carved image of the sitting Buddha.

Behind a curtain stretched midway across the tent he saw a figure lying on a couch. It was clad in all Loosang's finery. Under the high, lacquered hat was the head of a panther.

As Billings looked, the eyes rolled in the head toward him, and the jaw of the beast opened a little. Overhead the bell began to toll again as the wagon crossed some rough ground. The flesh on Billings' back grew cold. In the strong odor of the tent there was a smell of something unclean.

"Look," said Alashan. Around the ridgepole were arranged other heads, some of familiar animals, some of ghastly and obscene shapes.

"A mask," muttered Billings. "What is beneath?"

"Nothing. Weights, hung under them, move these eyes of painted mica. The jawbone is loose. It is an effigy."

"To frighten those who might look in while Loosang is away."

"Aye. But here is no sign of Nadesha."

Abruptly the wagon slowed, lurched and was still, tilted to one side. They were ditched. Looking out, Billings saw his pony and Alashan's horse. A spear's cast away was Norbo with his two servants and the pack animals.

Alashan walked to the horse of the Master of the Herds and Billings followed, while the Tatars stared in puzzled surprize. Luckily they were among a nest of dense thickets and no others were in view at the moment. But Billings knew that the mad flight of the sacred wagon across the plain had been seen by many, and that presently the fat *gylong* would catch up with them.

"My lord," the boy saluted the chieftain respectfully, "it is a lie that Loosang's body rests here while his spirit is abroad. Here is only a mask and garments. Loosang has gone from the Horde. Nadesha is not to be found. She has spoken with him. He is a master of evil, to my mind. I have read in his eyes that he lusts after her."

Unexpectedly the old woman servant spoke up, seizing the stirrup of the noble, her master.

"My lord, chief of the *ulus*, it is said in the tents that the shape of the lama was seen on the night before last, riding like a demon as tall as a tree, and attended by his familiar in the form of a woman."

"Whither did they turn the heads of their horses?" asked Alashan.

"Who knows, my young lord? Up into the stars where the *tengeri* leap from mountain to mountain or down into the earth where——"

"Alashan," broke in Billings, "the fat priest called Loosang abbot of Sonkor. Is that truth?"

"Aye," assented the boy, "he comes from the lamasery that is nearest the steppe."

"Do you know where it lies?"

The boy shook his head, whereupon Billings showed him a strip of yellow paper he had taken from the wallet in his coat—the map of the Armenian, showing the caravan route from Constantinople to Tashkent. It was inaccurate and wildly picturesque as to distances. In the northeast corner was picture of a tower and the legend "Sonkur." A mountain was drawn close by.

"It is in the air and in the water and the sand," muttered the old woman, "so the Kara Kirghiz say—the Black Kirghiz tribesmen."

With his sword's point Billings traced an equilateral triangle in the mud; then he glanced at the sun, reflecting dimly from the gray haze. With a last look at his map he replaced it carefully in his coat and thought for a moment.

"Sonkor lies in that quarter"—he pointed with his sword "—two days' and one night's hard riding."

Every one except Norbo drew back hastily from the triangle in the mud, and all surveyed Billings expectantly. This was surely magic! Billings, with the knowledge that the *gylongs* would arrive very soon in the thicket, had done some rapid thinking.

The map—unreliable as to distances—told him that the temple of Sonkor lay near mountains, at the edge of the river Chu, which flowed from the mountains of Tibet far to the southeast. So the old woman had proclaimed—near the heights, the sand and the water.

A single rider moves more swiftly than an army; Loosang would have left the Horde before they reached the point nearest to Sonkor. At the end of nine days he must be back again; so he could not give more than four days to each half of his journey, because even a Tatar *jigit* would need some hours' rest and a change of horses at Sonkor. Admitting that Loosang was travelling over the lower sides of his equilateral triangle, and the Horde had journeyed along the northern side for a day and a half, it was easy to see that Sonkor lay about two days and some hours and to the south by south east.

Billings was sure of this when he observed that the route he had figured for Loosang and Nadesha skirted the edge of the Kangar. No one would willingly cross the Kangar.

"That will lead me through the desert," reflected Alashan.

"Will you follow Loosang?"

"Aye." Alashan turned to his horse.

Then Norbo spoke for the first time.

"You have not asked permission of your father, the Khan, to leave the Horde."

Nadesha was greatly loved of Norbo. All three knew that if she had gone with Loosang to the place of the lamas it would be only by the rarest of good fortune that she would regain the Horde. Loosang, if he desired the girl, would not bring her back to the protection of her father and Ubaka Khan.

Yet the Master of the Herds, who could not leave his post, reminded Alashan that he was the son of the Khan and might not leave the Horde unbidden.

"Peace be with you, uncle," said Alashan moodily. "Let Zebek Dortshi and the others say that I have left the clan during suffering and hunger. Tell them so yourself, if you will."

He flung himself into the saddle.

"Give me goatskins for water, and another horse, Norbo! Give them to me. I shall follow Nadesha's trail until I find her." His dark cheeks flushed. "By the white horse of Natagai, my father will not call me a man! I go my own road."

The cracks in Norbo's worn face deepened and he pulled at his gray mustache. Billings, who had secured his own pony, now mounted and spoke, before the Master of the Herds.

"Alashan"—he listened for the splash of approaching hoofs—"I have told you one true word. And I have shown you where Sonkor lies. I can lead you to the temple with my maps. I will go with you."

The boy's eyes were hostile.

"Nay, I will find Nadesha without aid from you."

"Perhaps. But two swords are better than one. You are betrothed to Nadesha. I am her brother. We are together in this thing."

"*Kai*, be it so." Norbo nodded. "The son of the Khan must not go without a man to protect his back. Better a hundred men of my clan——"

"Not so," barked Alashan. "They would take the word to my father at once and I would be bound and beaten." He looked long at Billings. "If you are my companion in this thing, you are none the less my enemy when it is over—if we both live. Is that agreed?"

Under his mustache Billings smiled.

"*Kai*—be it so."

There was no time for more. The man servant who had been watching from the thicket reported the approach of riders led by the priests. Norbo quickly thrust the reins of his own horse into Alashan's hand, and gave the remaining riding pony to Billings.

"Come back to the Horde," he growled at Alashan, "or I am dishonored." To Billings he added coldly—

"Protect the prince."

As they put spurs to their horses, drawing the two spare mounts with them, Billings was still smiling. Here was a chance at liberty. With a horse—two horses and a weapon—he could reach Sonkor, and by the aid of his maps, work south to Tashkent where in time he could find a caravan going west to Samarkand and the Caspian.

In time, it could be done. He had promised to complete the map for Nadesha only so long as he should be with the Horde. Plying whip and spur the thicket was soon left behind and they merged among the groups of tired riders who, half-asleep, splashed through the mud.

Behind them two furious *gylongs* righted the sacred wagon and searched fruitlessly the myriad tracks around the thicket. They shot questions and threats at Norbo in the same breath. But the old Tatar had retired into his habitual silence.

When the priests rode off he began to walk through the marsh with the ungainly gait of one whose stiff limbs are better schooled to the belly of a horse. Followed by the two servants and the pack-animals, he trudged along, his eyes raised, from habit, to the gray expanse of sky in the east.

BUT not in two days and one night, or in twenty days, could Captain Billings have found the temple of Sonkor whither Loosang had gone with Nadesha. Before the sun had gone down for the first time he had lost his direction and a cloudy night concealed the stars.

They kept the wind, the hot wind that had sprung up during the day, at their backs. They rode in silence, Billings in the lead. Progress was slow—deep sandy dunes to be met with for the most part, and serried clay gullies that turned them aside constantly.

Billings fancied that they were ascending. His ears strained for a sound, but the darkness was like a heated curtain. The croaking of frogs, the trilling of birds—all this had been left behind them with the marshland. Nor was there any moisture in the air. The steppe of the Kangar, the Hunger Steppe, was a blind labyrinth of dunes and gullies.

"Halt and unsaddle the horses," ordered Alashan, when the night was about half done and the air was becoming a little chill. "Eat and sleep."

Surprized, Billings reined in. The boy was already working at the saddle girths and made no response to Billings' questions. When the maker of maps climbed down, Alashan spoke curtly.

"We are wandering, first on one hand, then the other. I have been watching that rock for an hour."

He pointed behind them, but only after straining his eyes a long time did Billings make out a bulk that was darker than the sky and the sand, an outcropping of basalt or sandstone shaped like a pillar.

"You are merely keeping your back to the wind," pointed out the Tatar angrily. "The wind changes."

Billings heard the boy's jaws crunch on a portion of the dried meat he had carried between saddle and saddle cloth to keep it warm and soft enough to eat.

"Nay—your map was a picture; this is a desert. How will you find the right direction in the morning?"

Billings was engaged with his scanty rations of decaying cheese and tough meat. They had been able to buy some provisions from another clan, and had filled their goatskins at a pool before leaving the Horde.

The map-maker was accustomed to lay a stick of wood along the course to be followed the next day when he made camp. But now he was aware that Alashan was right: he had been wandering from the true direction, and one quarter was like another. Moreover there had been no time at their departure to retrieve the compass from the packs containing his instruments.

"The sun will show us the way, Alashan."

"And if there be no sun?"

"Then we will see."

Morning dawned gray and cloudy. The wind had failed. The horses had found a scrub thicket of tamarisk and were feeding there, near a stagnant pool of yellow water. When Billings would have filled a half-empty goatskin here, Alashan pulled him back.

"That is death. Come, it is time—time."

They mounted, Billings stiffly, Alashan with a spring. The boy glanced over his shoulder.

"Which way?"

Surveying the sea of dunes, Billings noted the position of the purple finger of basalt. Away from this he turned his horse's head, and Alashan followed without comment. The boy rode like one possessed, pointing out the strips of clay that offered firmer footing than the sand on the tops of the ridges. He changed from horse to horse without halting.

At first Billings glanced at the boy, expecting him to halt, to eat. But Alashan pulled some of the dried meat from under a saddle and went on.

Billings removed his tattered coat and tied it behind his saddle, and then his waistcoat followed suit. He felt little relief. Then he tried chewing some of the meat, but that increased his thirst. Presently Alashan pulled down into the soft bottom of a gully. A line of tracks were visible.

"Two camels with riders," muttered Alashan.

He took the lead, following the tracks. They led slightly across the course Billings had been on. Before long other traces joined the camel tracks. Alashan studied them, dismounting in order to see the better.

"What can you say of this, my *giaour* captain?"

Utilizing the pause to fill his pipe, Billings shook his head good-humoredly.

"Nothing, except that they be horses."

"Horses of the Black Kirghiz. They are shod with yaks' hide, fastened by wooden plugs that leave traces in the sand."

"Hm," said Billings.

He had heard Nadesha say that the Kara

Kirghiz were mountaineers, the most powerful tribe of Central Asia. Also, they were occasionally in league with the Baskirs from the steppe, the most bitter foes of the Torguts.

Alashan's green eyes were triumphant at the knowledge that he had divested the older man of leadership. Not Billings' fault, for the maker of maps had been unable to bring his compass and the sky had been clouded.

"There is another trail!" he exclaimed, pointing ahead.

This proved to be other horses, again two. Before an hour had passed a fourth trail turned into the main track. Billings reflected and turned to the boy.

"The Kara Kirghiz live in the hills to the south and east, the Hindu Kush. Four pairs, or at least three, are riding swiftly back through the desert. Do you see the meaning in that?"

For answer Alashan's lip curled. It meant that each man of the Black Kirghiz had a spare horse—and so was equipped for fast travel. It meant, too, that four riders outside their own lands were meeting at a rendezvous in the heart of the Kangar.

"The Black Kirghiz are dogs and thieves. They have sent men to spy on the Horde. They are returning with news of what they have seen."

"*Kai*—it is so." Billings nodded. "But what was their meeting place in this purgatory of God?"

The boy was indifferent. Nor did he take the precaution of riding below the ridges they had been following. Billings, however, was interested in the question of a landmark. How could four riders have met—or at least turned into a common path—within six miles? He studied the horizon and presently touched Alashan's leg with his stirrup.

Ahead of them was smoke, rising from a clump of dead trees. Alashan declared that tents were visible in the thickets under the gnarled willows.

He would have gone ahead, into the encampment, thinking only of finding his way at once to Sonkor and Nadesha, but Billings persuaded him to circle the spot, keeping behind the sand ridges.

"If they watch, it would be toward the north," he explained, and the boy reluctantly consented.

They found the place to be a village, some wretched shepherd's huts and a herdsman's tent, by a pool of muddy water. The peasants were away in the willow clumps along the dried river bed in which the pool stood. The women and children ran and hid at their approach.

But on a bench outside a clay hut, Alashan found a Baskir man, dead drunk. A dromedary knelt by the desert rider, and under his sprawling feet was a sack of varied spoil.

"The Baskir fell in with the mountain men by chance," observed Alashan. "They gave him a skinful of drink to loosen his tongue and find out what he knew. Then they rode away to the south, as the traces show, in haste—because they did not lift his plunder. We will do so."

He sorted over the contents of the bag and found a soiled Cossack *svitza* or woolen coat, together with a fine red sash and green silk neckcloth. Rummaging further, he drew out a greasy lambskin cap. These things he gave to Billings.

"When we are outside the village you must put them on, my comrade," he pointed out. "The Baskir son of a dog has been robbing the dead in the path of the Horde."

He stared moodily at the snoring raider, and proceeded to strip him of *khalat*, pantaloons, leather leg wraps and turban. When it was too dark to follow the tracks of the Kirghiz they halted and gathered some of the dried tamarisk branches for a fire, lighting it in a deep hollow screened by bushes. While the flame was bright Alashan trimmed Billings' beard with his knife and shaved off the long hair back of the forehead. Then the maker of maps stripped to his shirt and boots and pulled on the rough nankeen breeches, the silk sash and the heavy *svitza*.

The garments were rich in material and, though slashed and stained, were nearly new. Billings wrapped the green cloth about his neck and thrust the hat on the back of his head as he had seen Mitrassof do. He had the erect carriage of a soldier, and so the Cossack garments did not look amiss on him. Moreover the sun had burned his skin to the hue of leather.

Meanwhile Alashan had done likewise with the Baskir's outfit, screening his long black hair with the loose folds of the turban that came down to his shoulders. The boy's chin was lean, his nose thin and downcurved, so that he fitted into the part of a desert man.

Alashan looked up and his eyes narrowed. He had not known Billings would be so striking a figure in Cossack dress. "A real gallant," he told himself, and his eye fell on the belt with the wolf's head that Billings had cast carelessly into the sand.

"Would you part with *that?*" he cried.

"With what?" Billings glanced down and whistled reflectively.

If they were to go into Loosâng's temple—and he had given up hope of overtaking the lama before then—he could not well wear the emblem of a Tatar clan. Alashan himself had suggested the disguises as necessary when he saw that the Kara Kirghiz were afoot.

"Look here, Alashan," he suggested, "why don't you keep the thing, under your girdle? Nadesha is your girl."

The boy flushed angrily. He would not receive a gift from Billings. The mapmaker could never understand the boy's nature. Nevertheless, he did not bury the wolf's head in the sand with his other worn-out garments but left it lying by the fire. In the morning he saw that it was gone, and judged that Alashan had it about him.

As they were lying down on their saddle cloths to sleep, Billings turned to the boy.

"Do you think Nadesha went with Loosang of her own will?"

Silence. Billings felt that he had said something harmful.

"Alashan, it looks as if the Kirghiz, whoever they are, were gathering around Sonkor. What does that mean?"

It was so long before the son of the Khan answered that Billings lay back and was settling his shoulders in the sand when a jackal snarled from beyond the hollow.

"The wild dogs are sitting on their haunches," said Alashan in a low voice. "The jackals have come from afar; the vultures are in the air."

"Here?"

"Nay, around the Horde."

Billings, as he pictured the road-weary clans crossing the desert steppe, a hundred and fifty miles in three days, thought this was more than likely.

SONKOR would not have been found by Billings alone for the reason that it was hidden from any searcher who should come over the steppe. Alone, the captain might have combed the plateau for months and seen only the occasional *aul* of a shepherd, or the basalt shafts that might have been tombstones of giants.

But Alashan followed the Kirghiz tracks with the nose of a ferret until hostile tribesmen, appearing ahead of them on the trail, forced them to turn aside. Then it was Billings who used an old trick of the explorers and ascended a height from which the ground in front of them could be surveyed as clearly as if drawn on a map.

"By Jove!" he said.

Even Alashan drew in his breath quickly. The red clay sloped away sharply in front, evidently to the edge of a precipice. Beyond and below this was a great, green valley topped on the farther side by mountains of immense extent. In the center of the valley they could see a sluggish river winding, and on the nearer bank of the river a camp of more than a thousand tents, with ranks of camels and horse herds grazing near the water.

"The Chu," Billings decided.

"And the camp of the Black Kirghiz," assented Alashan gravely.

They looked for signs of the horsemen they had seen along the trail, but the riders had vanished. It was late afternoon and darkness would set in before they could pick up the tracks again and follow them down to the river.

Alashan pointed out the high, black hats on some of the soldiers in the nearest tents, the stacked arms, and the standards topped by huge elk antlers. He judged there were at least eight thousand of the tribesmen. The distance was too great for Billings to see these particulars, but it struck him that the number of horses was more than that.

"True," agreed Alashan after a pause; "the Kirghiz have been raiding. No Kirghiz women are in the camp. The horses have been lifted from the Baskirs, when most of the Moslem tribesmen were riding against us."

"Then it is well we did not follow the riders down to the Chu," Billings pointed out. "You wear the garb of a Baskir."

Alashan seemed indifferent. He was squinting into the distance, trying to read the answer to the question as to what brought the power of the Kirghiz so near the steppe. His face was drawn. From the *aul* where they had obtained their disguise, they had wandered for two days, being forced to camp at night in order to keep the trail in view. It had been a test of endurance, and both were still fit. They had drawn on their reserve strength, Billings more than the Tatar, and their eyes were overbright, their hands restless.

"What are the Kirghiz doing here?" asked the map-maker.

The tents seemed to him to be arrayed in a sort of semicircle, facing the height on which they stood.

Said Alashan, bitterly:

"The wild dogs are sitting on their haunches, waiting; the jackals have come from afar. The Kirghiz live by raiding down from the mountains, but this is greater than a raid. They ride to a slaying."

"Hope it's not us," thought Billings. "I am going to look at the edge of that precipice," he added aloud. "That sandstone rock might be a watch-tower."

They had not much fear of being seen from below because numberless masses of sandstone made the summit of the slope jagged, as if it were a crenelated battlement. Billings climbed from his saddle and slipped down the slope, holding to the points of the rocks. He was careful not to dislodge any of the soft fragments of stone. Coming to the edge, he ducked down and, lying on his belly, stared over the brink. He was looking at Sonkor.

The precipice was nearly sheer, a wall of red and purple stone, beneath which stood a black temple. It was black from the top of its twin towers to the crude wall of flat rocks that surrounded its courtyard. Its lines were curiously deceptive.

"The walls slope in markedly, and so do the towers," he thought. "Let me see, two, five, seven rows of windows. Arrow slits, rather. Must be seven stories high. The slope inward must make it look gigantic from the Chu."

The peculiar black appearance was due to the stone used—granite and basalt, evidently brought by boat from the upper gorges of the Chu. (Billings was observing for the first time some of the devices used by the Tibetan lamas to make their temples formidable, in looks as well as strength. In Lhassa there were monastery halls with pillars of chenars that did not grow within a thousand miles.)

He saw too that more tents of the Kirghiz were clustered just outside the courtyard wall and that the court and the roofs of the temple were quite deserted.

Returning to Alashan, he reported what he had seen. The boy was all for searching out a way down the cliff. Billings nodded, but their exhausted horses stood with heads close to the ground, and legs quivering.

"Done for," Billings reflected. "Food's gone. Sunset—dark in half an hour." He glanced at Alashan. "Can we enter the Kirghiz camp? It surrounds the temple on three sides, and on the other side is the cliff."

"Nadesha is there, in the lamasery."

"True. And Loosang is there. Alashan, to-night is the sixth of his nine nights away from the Horde. It is in my mind that tomorrow he must mount again to ride to the northwest. If we are to reach Nadesha before he goes it must be this night."

"True." Alashan gnawed his lip. "In the dark we can slip through the camp, keeping away from the watch fires. Within the lamasery we would find the going harder. No one is allowed within the temple gate except the guests of the lamas, and they are watched by armed guards——"

"I saw no guards."

"They watch from the embrasures. If the sons of the devil are all within the temple it means they are preparing a ceremonial for the night. If so the doors of the lamasery will be closed."

Billings tethered his horse reflectively to a dead oak and shrugged. Even the moon had been obscured for three nights, as if to make their efforts useless. To get down the cliff in the dark would be hard work. For a pseudo-Baskir and a Cossack bravo to penetrate into the temple of Bon would be a problem. To find Nadesha and speak with her under the nose of Loosang would be a miracle—if, indeed, Nadesha had actually reached Sonkor.

But Alashan was convinced that she was there. So far the instinct of the boy of the steppe had proved true.

"Have you a plan?" Billings asked the son of the Khan.

Alashan laughed, for the first time since the map-maker had known him.

"I have no plan, captain. But I feel that a way will be opened. Look, there are vultures in the sky over the camp; and the sunset is red—the gate in the sky is red. There will be blood under our feet this night. *Kai*—I know it."

"He's a fool of a pagan, and a savage," thought Billings. "But, may the black pest take me, I can't let him go down into that cesspool of Satan alone. I'll stand by him until Nadesha is found, or the boy gets his throat slit; then I'll look after myself."

A brazen thunder shook their eardrums. It seemed as if the very clouds overhead had trumpeted down a challenge. Billings swore and clutched at his sword hilt. Alashan glanced up from narrowed eyes.

Again came the note of the trumpets, repeated three times, fainter and more mellow. An echo came back from the mountains across the river.

By a common impulse the man and the boy turned and ran back toward the summit of the slope leading to the cliff. Looking over the rise cautiously they beheld four black figures below them on the edge of the cliff. Four bronze trumpets, longer than the tall musicians, were leveled out across the valley.

Then the horns were lowered over the precipice and the three notes repeated. This done, the four lamas turned to one side, in single file and disappeared among the nest of rocks that Billings had called a pulpit.

Billings chuckled under his breath. He could see thousands of ant-like figures running out of the Kirghiz tents to stare up at the cliff.

"The way is opened," whispered Alashan. "There must be a passage down to the temple from the spot."

They crept after the four from boulder to boulder until they came to a sandstone ridge halved by a wide crack. Alashan pointed to the print of feet in the dust here. Entering the shadow between the rocks, they left daylight behind them at once.

Shelving downward, the path turned aside into what seemed solid rock. But here Billings saw the gleam of a candle far down and ahead of them. Quickening their pace, they hurried on and at the next turn made out the trumpeters, in single file, the leader with the candle.

The immense horns delayed the progress of the lamas so that Billings and Alashan kept up with them easily. The cleft had changed to a kind of wide tunnel, twisting and irregular. Only in the steepest descents were steps cut into the soft stone. Limestone, Billings believed, and judged that water had cut this channel down into the valley of the Chu hundreds of years ago, when the river was still eating its way down to its present course.

More than once they passed along the floor of a lofty cavern, their steps muffled by the inch-deep carpet of white, powdered rock. And once they edged warily across a natural bridge over such a cavern, almost losing sight of the candle as they did so.

The air grew much warmer. They were forced to stoop now, to work down a low passage. Billings judged that the air, here, was heated by the rays of the afternoon sun on the cliff outside, and that they must be close to the entrance. Nor was he wrong.

"——" he muttered.

He had seen the lama in the lead pause at a heavy, wooden door, and knock. The portal swung open. Stooping, the four trailed out with their horns. The door swung shut. Billings and the boy were in total darkness. Both knew that they could not find their way back. True, they had flint and steel and some powder, but there was nothing in the cavern to ignite.

They made their way down to the door, knocking their heads more than once. Feeling the stout boards cautiously and pressing against them, Billings decided the portal was barred on the outside. Wiping the sweat out of his eyes, he considered.

"Alashan," he whispered, "the lamas have stationed a guard at this end of the passage. The men with the horns did not open the door themselves. There was a sentry on the other side. Good. We will knock and get ourselves admitted to the presence of Bon before the guard goes elsewhere."

He did so, rather hastily. It had occurred to him suddenly that the lama on watch might have gone away after the others, being posted at the door to let them in. But it was likely, if anything unusual was in the wind that evening, that a man would be stationed to watch the door.

A step sounded on the other side of the barrier. Billings knocked again, loudly, as if he had a right to enter. One of the bars was taken down. Then silence.

Plainly the man on the other side was puzzled. Billings rapped a third time, impatiently.

"Stand back," he ordered Alashan softly. "Be ready."

The other bar came down. The door swung toward them, concealing them in its shadow. A shaven head, wrinkled and bare as a snake's, was thrust into the passage.

A flash, followed by the sound of metal striking bone. Alashan had brought down the back of his sword viciously on the priest's pate. The man sprawled forward, coughing, writhed; and Alashan struck again, this time with the edge. Then he caught the long, cassocked form and tugged it well into the passage. Billings was not prepared for this.

"*Tchou*, my cousin," Alashan hissed, "would you tie a viper with silk, or play with an adder in the dark? Besides, he is not dead. You do not know these devils. Look!"

He lifted the head of the guard, pulling back the lips from the teeth. Billings saw that they were sharpened to points. He glanced out of the passage. No one else was visible.

A lamp glimmered in a basin of oil beside the doorway. They could make out that the room outside the passage was very lofty, that its walls were the white limestone itself. In the center of the chamber directly in front of them was what appeared to be a broad column of black lacquer.

After Alashan had closed the door and replaced the bars, leaving the unconscious lama in the passage, they searched the walls for another exit. A second door stood opposite the first, and this also was locked on the outside.

Billings listened at the crack and made out a dull murmur some distance away. It was the camp of the Kirghiz. He knocked tentatively, but this time there was no response.

"Stop." Alashan caught his arm. "If we are seen coming from here, it will be the end of everything."

He pointed up over his head. They could see the front of the lacquer column now. The candle, behind it, framed in blackness a score of arms projecting from the sides.

"A spider," muttered Billings.

"Bon," said Alashan softly, "the Destroyer."

The entangled arms ended in hands, each gripping some weapon or object. In one was a child, in swaddling cloths. Snakes and varied beasts kept the child—in lacquer—company. On the breast of Bon, who squatted on a square pedestal, was a tiny woman, her legs and arms clutching the broad body of the god.

They could see clearly, because a round window in the rock wall directly in front of the face of Bon admitted the last, ruddy light of sunset. The face itself was like a Buddha, cold and expressionless.

"*Pfagh!*" grunted Billings.

He could understand now that the lamas had availed themselves of a large cavern just inside the cliff wall for a tabernacle for the figure of the god. The opening in the cliff let in light during the day, and permitted worshipers from the plain to see the face of Bon. If illumined from within the effect must be striking.

Even as they watched, the last gleams departed from the glittering crown of Bon. They looked at each other curiously. To break down the door would be to bring the lamasery swarming about them. To return to the height by way of the tunnel was impossible.

There remained the aperture in the cliff. But the rock wall was sheer. So the two intruders sat down and listened to the faint sounds from the camp. They knew that in time some one would come into the chamber of Bon from the temple to relieve the guard at the tunnel door. Then they might slip out. Looking up once restlessly, the map-maker drew in his breath.

The countenance of the god was shining with a soft, green light. It was a reflection of some kind.

"The moon is up," explained Alashan calmly.

Suddenly Billings chuckled and sprang to his feet.

"I know how we can look from the hole in the cliff. Help me up this pedestal."

When Alashan had boosted him up to the footstool of the image, Billings began to climb the front of the giant god, pulling himself up by the arms that stuck out in every direction, and the limbs of the clinging woman. Now the highest pair of arms were folded, hands crossed, just under the chin of Bon, so that Billings was furnished a perch within a yard of the round opening. Alashan joined him. The statue being fashioned of solid wood under the lacquer work, they were secure.

The ceremonial had begun. They looked out directly over the roof of the lamasery, between the two towers. Billings fancied that the door from the cavern led out upon the roof itself. The moon was rising somewhere to the left, over the valley, but its half light was eclipsed by the smoking glare of lines of torches in the courtyard of the lamasery. Here the lamas were standing in rows, forming a lane out of the court, through the Kirghiz camp, down the slope toward the Chu.

"When the moon is full, these devils drag out their idols to the river for all to see," muttered Alashan. "It is at this time expeditions set out from the land of the *Tsong Khapa*. See, the Black Kirghiz are watching."

Already a line of *sakyas*—neophytes—carrying lighted pastels were moving out of the courtyard. Next was led a black horse, bearing the state robes of the abbot of Sonkor, horsemen in yellow cassocks with painted spears. Behind a boy carrying a basin of glowing coals were thin Tibetans with the standards of Sonkor—long poles, wrapped around with rags.

"A tawdry manner of finery," thought Billings. "Hulloa!"

Following the standards and pulled by other rows of disciples came a cart filled with women wearing lotus flowers and carrying the blossoms in their hands. Seated among these women was a small figure wearing a red *khalat* and a cloth of silver cap.

Billings glanced at Alashan. The boy had recognized Nadesha in her Persian dress as she turned her face.

"There is Nadesha, the daughter of Norbo," he said calmly. "But Loosang I do not see."

Indeed the cart bearing small, painted images of various gods that came after the women had no human occupant. Billings reflected that here was Nadesha's country of a thousand devils—the land where men wore the faces of beasts. For the lamas carrying the four trumpets of Sonkor were masked as usual.

But Nadesha herself was here—apparently of her own will—and riding in the cart with the women attendants of the temple. Billings wondered if she had left the hard lot of the Horde for this estate. He knew that Alashan, who loved Nadesha fiercely, did not believe this. He himself suspected that Nadesha was up to one of her games, a trick that bade fair to be her last, because it was Loosang she tricked and the lama had her in his power.

"Climb down," whispered Alashan curtly.

Not until he had quit the circle of subdued light did Billings hear the sound of the opening door that had aroused the boy. It was too late to gain the ground. They waited, poised on the fat belly of Bon, the Destroyer. Three men entered the outer door.

Loosang was the leader. The two others were bearded tribesmen, wearing heavy black lambs' wool hats and with girdles literally stuffed with weapons—good ones. For all their swagger, they eyed the great form of Bon sidewise and Billings was grateful for the deep shadow that covered the front of the god.

As if puzzled by the absence of the guard Loosang inspected the inner door, the candle, and walked around the image of Bon. Then, satisfied that no one was to be found in the rock chamber, he squatted down facing the tribesmen.

So long did the *chutuktu* wait before speaking that one, a red-haired giant, looked up.

"Where is that Russian money, you fox?"

"In the tents of the Horde, Nuralin Khan."

They spoke freely, believing themselves alone, and in Tatar, the common speech of the steppe. Billings did not understand it all, but learned later from Alashan what had passed. Afterward Billings decided that Loosang had taken pains to stow this cache away for himself where no one would find it.

"*Hai*, it shall be ours, Loosang, my owl. And the horses and camels of the Horde—tens of thousands of them, you say. And their weapons, bought of the Muscovites, captured from the Turks; good pieces, you swear. If you have lied, I'll make you dine off your cassock."

He leered at the lama, blinking. Nuralin Khan had kissed the jug that night. Then he began to stroke his unkempt beard with a hand on which the very hairs were red.

"All that is very well my *chutuktu*. But you claim half the spoil. That is too much even for a devil like you."

"If it is too much, then you and your dogs can search out the Horde on the open steppe. Attack them there if you will and see if you will raise their hides or not." Loosang spoke coldly.

The other Kirghiz, a stunted man with a pinched mouth and evil eyes snarled at this.

"You have sworn an oath, Loosang. You have pledged your word to lead the Horde to the place where we will wait, in the hills. If the Torguts go the other way, over the plain to Balkash, then you will have no profit. Nay, our paths lie together in this. Keep faith with us, or we will bring our cannon to knock down the walls of Sonkor——"

"Fool, spawn of a lizard! Will you go against the word of *him* who is master of Lhassa?"

The elder Kirghiz fell silent. But Nuralin Khan, swaying as he sat, continued his grumbling.

"You will sit safe in your *yurt*, Loosang, while we face the arrows and the flintlocks of the Torguts. Ubaka Khan is an ox. He will take a lot of killing."

"And I—" Loosang's lips drew back—"have arranged that Ubaka will not be at the head of the Horde when you strike it. There is another khan in the Horde who will see to that."

This impressed the two chieftains. They looked at each other and asked the name of the lama's confederate. But Loosang was not telling all he knew.

"How many riders have you, Nuralin Khan?"

"A thousand and another thousand tents.* More will join us at the appointed place."

"You were foolish to plunder the Baskirs. With those wolves hanging on the flanks of the Horde your task would be easier."

"And there would be more to share the Russian money in the Torgut tents, the leather and furs and weapons and horseflesh. As it is, a half is too much for you."

"A half of my share goes to Lhassa. The Dalai Lama is pleased to be angry with the Torguts because they favor the old beliefs and turn their eyes to Natagai, in the skies."

"So they must die, eh? Well, it is all one to us, provided you keep faith." Nuralin Khan considered. "Ubaka has been driving his men and beasts too hard. My *jigits* are in from the Kangar and they say the Horde is weak—weak."

Loosang stuck out his long neck, as if pleased. The Baskirs, he explained, had done that; the Russians under Traubenberg had not followed the Horde beyond Orenburg. So the Moslem clan had pursued the Torguts on its own account. Ubaka had thought the Russian army was on the march, and the Baskirs its advance.

When he might have rested in the fertile lands before the Kangar, Ubaka had set out again on his journey.

"How was that?" demanded the old Kirghiz.

"I persuaded him through the khan who is my friend. After the crossing of the Kangar his riders will be like foundered horses. They will go down before your swords like wheat under the wind. Not more than a hundred times a thousand souls are still living in the Horde. Mustering even old men with spears and young boys with arrows, they will have only fifteen times a thousand to ride against you. I will arrange that they suspect nothing, that the clans travel far apart, the fighting men mixed with the sick and the animals. You must have your full strength drawn up at the place agreed on."

The small eyes of Nuralin Khan twinkled. He stretched massive arms, one at a time, and yawned.

"The old women and the men will be slain; the younger women who are yet alive——"

"Half to me."

"Aye," leered the older Kirghiz, "silver and gold may be had for the Tatar youths in the slave market at Bokhara."

"It is all one to me," drawled Nuralin Khan. "By the Lotus, you councilors of the pit can slay many men with words. But my sword must do the work, you foxes."

Quickly he lifted his head. Alashan had been breathing rapidly during the conversation that revealed the treachery of Loosang. Just then his scabbard had slipped down from his knee to the full length of its strap and clanked against the lacquer image.

Nuralin Khan sprang to his feet. The moonlight had been growing stronger; by it he could make out, cradled in the long arms of Bon, a shapeless mass.

"*Tchou!* Look—it moves!"

The rat-faced chief, perhaps remembering that they had been speaking none too reverently of the sacred gods, ran to the outer door. Nuralin Khan followed more slowly, glancing back over his shoulder. Loosang stood his ground, frowning.

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* About fifteen thousand men.

Meanwhile Alashan acted. He leaped bodily for the lama, but landed heavily within the shadow in front of the image, plunged down on his hands with the shock of the fall. This was enough for Nuralin Khan, who fled through the door.

Perceiving that he was deserted, and, sensing danger, Loosang slipped out of the door, closing it after him before Alashan could reach him. The bars outside the portal were dropped into place and Loosang's high voice lifted in a warning shout.

"Come, Alashan." Billings joined the boy, who stood trembling with anger, sword in hand. "Pick up your hat."

He unbarred the door into the passage, signed for Alashan to help and carried the still unconscious guard back to the spot where the boy had jumped down.

"Loosang did not see you. I watched. Pray that some tribesmen come in with the priests."

He quenched the lamp and drew the Tatar back with him into the passage, closing the door nearly, but not quite. Almost immediately the outer portal swung open and a dozen armed lamas appeared, Loosang among them.

The torches that the newcomers carried soon revealed the prostrate figure under the pedestal of Bon. After scanning the chamber and finding nothing else amiss they advanced to stare at the guard. They turned him over, noticing the bruise on his shaven skull.

Then Loosang looked up at the giant Bon as if puzzled. He had seen a man drop, in the shadow. Here was a man with a bruise on his head. Palpably this servant of the temple had been playing the spy, and—of all places—in the arms of the Destroyer. Loosang was not satisfied.

With a cry one of the Tibetans pointed out the deep sword-cut across the side of the wounded man. They pressed closer, lowering the torches to see better. Some tribesmen edged inside the door in the wake of Nuralin, who had sobered rapidly. This moment Billings chose to slip out of the door opening from the passage and move along the wall with Alashan. They were concealed by the shadow cast by the ring of priests.

"The passage!" shouted Loosang, noticing the door. "Whoever has entered has gone back that way."

Although the most degenerate of men, the lamas were not lacking in zeal, daring or intelligence. They rushed into the passage for the most part. Others bore out the body of the guard and started to clear the staring Kirghiz out of the temple.

Billings and Alashan had joined the tribesmen during the confusion. The map-maker had pinned his trust to human curiosity; but this same trait was now causing the Kirghiz—who had been drinking—to wonder how a Cossack and a Baskir were in their company.

Once outside the door, however, Billings gave them no time to grow more suspicious, but made off down the first stairway to hand. It led through the refectory of the temple, out into the courtyard. Coming from within the temple, they were not challenged.

They pushed through groups of the lamas, went out into the camp and turned aside among the lines of camels where there were no fires. Alashan wanted to go down toward the river to find Nadesha.

"Listen, my captain," he said briefly. "What we have heard must come to the ears of Ubaka Khan, my father. We have not yet learned the place where the Kirghiz will lie in wait for the Horde. We must know that. Nadesha will find out. Then we will take her with us and steal horses from the cordon."

They came to the wagons standing by the river bank. Most of the women of the temple had mingled with the crowd of soldiers and were laughing and singing about the near-by fires where feasting was going on in honor of the festival.

Nadesha however still sat on the edge of the temple cart, a lotus flower between her lips, her dark eyes, rimmed with *kohl*, surveying the crowd that kept at a respectful distance. For Loosang, mounted, and wearing his yellow robe of office was beside her, a half-dozen armed lamas close behind him. Around the wagon eddied groups of tribesmen, thin Turkomans, squat, turbaned Chatagais, quarrelsomely drunk.

"The vultures are flying together," whispered the boy bitterly. "They would not attack the Horde in fair battle. They seek a corpse to pick bare with their beaks."

Billings nudged the youth to silence. It was all-important that they speak with

Nadesha before Loosang and the women withdrew into the lamasery, where no tribesmen would be welcome. Just then Nuralin Khan swaggered up, having recovered from his scare at the temple. He advanced close to Nadesha, hands on hips.

"By the belly of Bon, here is a wanton to make glad the eye of a chief. A round face and a bright eye, a form fair and melting."

Nadesha smiled at him, and the Kirghiz sought to take her hand.

"Peace, Nuralin Khan," shrilled Loosang. "She is a Tatar who has claimed the protection of the god."

"Tatar or Persian—all one to me," mumbled the other.

And Billings, seeing his chance, thrust Alashan back. Pushing the Cossack hat over one eye and lifting the green neckcloth to cover his mouth, he lurched forward, clapped Nuralin Khan on the back and leaned heavily against the wagon, his head almost upon Nadesha's knee.

Nuralin Khan looked around, his hand on a pistol, but seeing only a besotted Cossack he spat and returned to his quarrel with the lama. Loosang glanced keenly at Billings, but the red-haired chieftain was between them.

Meanwhile Billings kept muttering to himself. The girl at first glanced contemptuously at him, then her eyes widened and she leaned forward, apparently to watch what was going on between the others.

"Captain Beel-ing," she whispered in Russian.

"Alashan is with me," returned Billings. "How can you leave the wagon and join us?"

"I can not. The men of Loosang have orders to seize me if I put foot down from the cart of the women."

Nadesha smiled, gratified that two men had risked their lives for her. She could not keep her eyes from seeking out Alashan in the shadows.

"*Ai-a!*" Her mobile face clouded. "Why did you disobey my word and leave the Horde? I planned for you to show them the right road when Loosang tries to lead them where death waits."

"We will all go back together, Nadesha. That is—you and Alashan."

Billings broke off to curse a staring Chatagai and thrust the man away. The mountaineer laid hand on knife and eclipsed Billings' curse with a vitriolic insult. Billings drew his sword and the tribesman edged back, muttering.

"Harken, Captain Beel-ing," cried the girl. "I have found out that for which I came hither. Loosang plots with the Kir——"

"I know. Alashan seeks to learn the place of ambush."

"The ford of the river Kara-su. Remember, and go. Rejoin the Horde."

"Alashan will not go without you," said Billings, and repeated, "The Kara-su."

"*Kai!*" The girl's eyes glowed with pride. "He must go to his clan. Loosang will ride there, too. He must leave me in Sonkor. Tell Alashan that I will escape before long."

But Billings knew there was little chance of that. Nadesha, it seemed, had tricked Loosang. To do so, she had thrown her own life into the hazard. He had not realized before how much he liked Nadesha.

She threw off the hand of the Kirghiz and pretended to turn her shoulder to him.

"Alashan must ride with the news," she whispered to Billings. "Then Ubaka in truth will call him a man, and the Horde will know him for a son of the Khan——"

Breaking off swiftly, she lifted her chin.

"I am the woman of Loosang, the *chutuktu*. Go, Cossack, and wallow with your pigs of Christians!"

Billings had been too intent on her tidings to heed the silence that had fallen about them. Now he saw that Nuralin Khan had drawn back, that the Chatagai was whispering to Loosang, and that all eyes were on his naked sword. Too wise to try to leave the cart, Billings coughed and rolled his head stupidly, aping a drunken son of the steppe. The lama, head thrust forward, surveyed him.

"You ride far from your steppe, Cossack," he observed in Russian.

Billings blinked as if beholding the abbot for the first time.

"Aye, *batko*, father—I followed a thieving Baskir and lost my way on the Kangar."

He mumbled his words, but Loosang pricked up his ears. Billings' Russian was far from perfect.

"A Cossack—lost his way on the steppe! That is a lie!"

"I kissed the jug once too often, father."

"A Cossack—with a Frankish rapier!"

His long, straight blade had excited the curiosity of the angered Chatagai, who had pointed it out to Loosang. All the Cossack sabers were curved, after the lines of the Moslem simitar. Billings was reluctant to open his mouth again, but there was no help for it.

"I had it from a merchant in Zaritzan. Devil take you, priest! If you want to sample the blade, set a tribesman against me; come, do!"

The other tribesmen pressed closer, and Nuralin Khan laid one huge hand on a long pistol stock. He had guessed the meaning of Billings' words.

"I will shoot the heart out of the dog," he proclaimed, lifting the weapon.

"Peace!" The lama held up his hand. "That sword I have seen before. *Ekh*—here is the *giaour*, the Christian prisoner of the Tatars!"

Nuralin Khan craned forward, interested. A thin smile spread the lips of the lama.

"Aye, this is the brother of Nadesha, who would make a map from the sun, to guide the Horde."

His vindictive delight showed how much Billings' seizure meant to the priest.

"Now my way is clear," he was whispering to Nuralin Khan.

"Loosang, *chutuktu*," broke in Nadesha, "I have kept my promise. I have delivered the *giaour* to you, in your hands. Now I claim protection of the gods."

Her brown eyes flashed warningly at Billings, as if to tell him that she would yet find a way out. But the maker of maps was eyeing Nuralin Khan's pistol. Words, he knew, could not help matters now. A few sword strokes and it would be all over, one way or the other. He set his back against the cart and waited. Loosang bent toward the girl.

"Harlot!" he said. "The spy has spoken with you."

And he struck Nadesha on the lips. As he did so a figure in a soiled *khalat* and loose turban slipped between the Chatagai and Nuralin Khan.

Alashan decided matters in his own way. With the dagger clutched in his left hand he stabbed Loosang, the knife striking into the ribs of the lama. A squeal of pain came from the tall man's teeth.

A flurry in the throng, a general cry of rage. Alashan leaped to the cart as men rushed at him. He threw the dagger into their faces, caught Nadesha up in both arms, sprang off the opposite side of the wagon. Here, in comparative darkness, there were no bystanders.

"To the river!" shouted Billings.

He parried the stroke the Chatagai aimed at his head, thrust the man through the throat. Freeing his blade, he slashed wide at another face, and jumped to the cart.

Nuralin Khan's pistol blazed; and the powder blast stung his hand. Billings turned and ran after Alashan and Nadesha. The boy had set Nadesha on her feet, and the twain were running swiftly away from the torches, between the tents. A lane opened up ahead of them, and at the end of it gleamed the surface of the Chu.

The thudding of feet behind him told Billings that pursuit was close. He halted and swung about, crouching. A spear whistled over his shoulder, and his blade clashed against the simitar of a Kirghiz. The man staggered from a thrust in the stomach, and another who followed at his heels drew back before the glitter of steel.

Billings turned and dashed off, looking about for a horse. Instead he saw a group of armed men at the end of the tents, and Alashan and Nadesha struggling furiously against overpowering force.

"Captain Billings!" shouted the boy, his voice breaking. "Leave us. Ride to the Horde—warn my father——"

There was a sharp snap as his sword broke. Nadesha was still making play with her dagger. But Billings saw at once that they were as good as captives. Indeed, as he changed his course and darted between two tents he heard Alashan singing his death chant defiantly.

After all, Alashan had taken his own way in dealing with Loosang. For once luck favored Billings and he found himself among a nest of felt tents—the quarters of some noble. Tripping over the ropes, he dodged about, catching glimpses of running men and turning away from the glare of torches.

In front of him he sighted the river, a dense thicket of reeds lining its bank. This however was the goal toward which his pursuers were headed. A group of them were plunging close behind him, but momentarily he was in shadow, and they had lost the scent.

Billings halted, looked about, and flung himself on the ground, crawling under the side of a pavilion. Small chance, he thought, for him on the water, so bright was the moon. As he expected the large tent was vacant, the occupants—if there had been any within just then—having run out at the noise of the pursuit.

It was a large tent, belonging to a person of importance, and a filigreed, bronze lamp hung from the top of the pole. Garments, skins, weapons were scattered about. Billings tore off his Cossack coat and cap, selected the first fur-edged *khalat* his hand touched and donned a huge, black lambskin hat that came down over his ears.

Only a moment remained before the lamas would begin investigating the tents. Billings ducked out as he had come, and began to walk quickly back toward the temple.

"They'll be harrying the river and the outskirts of the blessed encampment," he reasoned. "It won't do to leave for a while."

Suddenly perceiving that his sword was still bare in his hand, the blade smirched with blood, he thrust it under the *khalat* and swaggered on slowly, pausing when lights went past and avoiding the camp fires.

"This won't do, either," he reflected. "The Kirghiz will be looking for a Cossack, to be sure, but the eyes of those devils of lamas—I can't chance that."

As a matter of fact the tribesmen he passed paid no attention to him. He saw nothing more of Alashan or Nadesha. The tumult had quieted down, but he noticed that the number of torches flickering among the reeds had increased and that armed and mounted lamas were patrolling every main avenue of the camp. It would be only a matter of time before they recognized him if he remained where he was.

Heading back to where he and Alashan had passed among the herds, he came to a fire, a mere bed of embers, over which a caldron smoked with an appetizing odor. Several sleepy horse guards were lying about. These Billings joined. One muttered.

"*Temou chu!* Dwell in peace."

"*Ahatou*—brother," responded the map-maker, dipping his hand into the caldron. He was aware, all at once, that he was giddy from hunger. There were still portions of mutton in the pot, and of these he ate ravenously. From time to time Kirghiz came to the horse lines, saddled animals and rode off.

"A very wizard of a *giaour* is afoot. We must take him," one said in reply to a lazy question from the men around the fire. "No doubt he was drowned in the river. May the black plague take the lamas."

Another who sauntered up from the direction of the temple did not even seek out a horse, but squatted down to light his pipe from the embers.

"They have the Tatar buck and his fiend of a girl up at the temple," he observed, yawning.

"Have they been tortured yet?" some one asked.

"Nay; Loosang has sworn that the princeling and the woman shall be taken by the lamas to our ambush on the Kara-Su, so that their eyes shall see the death of their clan."

The moon, by now, was low to the west, and Billings judged by the mist over the river and the feel of chill in the air that the night was well advanced. His companions, all but one who smoked and spat into the fire at regular intervals, were snoring. The camp, was dark, except for the towers of Sonkor upon which the moon still struck, over the trees.

It was time for Billings to move. Leisurely he rose, went to the pile from which he had seen Kirghiz taking saddles, selected one and moved toward the line of horses. From the corners of his eyes he watched the dark bulk that was the wakeful horse guard. The man's pipe glowed on tranquilly.

Evidently Billings' stay at the fire had disarmed any suspicion. Nevertheless he was uneasy until he had secured what he sought from the piles of gear by the cordon—saddle bags, with a fair quantity of rice, dates and dried meat. Then he flung the saddle on a large pony, praying that his choice might be a good one, adjusted the halter and mounted.

"Peace be with you, brother," muttered the guard.

Guiding himself by the loom of the cliff on his left, he threaded his way through the camp. Once he passed a patrol coming in. Quickening his pace, he hastened to be out of sight of the camp before dawn should come.

His luck held good that night. A heavy mist rolled up from the river, and although Billings heard sentries calling more than once, he was not stopped. The memory of the fox-like faces of the lamas made him use his spurs.

"With daybreak," he reasoned, "they will follow any single track out of the camp. But I could swim my horse across the Chu, strike down south toward Tashkent and be out of their reach in a few hours."

The river beckoned him to safety. Once in the caravan routes to Turkestan he would be on his way back to Astrakan. This was what he had planned—except that Alashan and Nadesha were prisoners of Loosang instead of free. On the other hand, north of him was the Kangar, and he was in poor shape to cross the desert again. True, it would be skirting the eastern edge of it this time, but the country was strange to him and without Alashan he would be at a disadvantage. And soon the warrior monks doubtless would hit upon his track.

Alashan and Nadesha were dead, or as good as dead, he ruminated. Even if he should carry the word of the ambush to the Horde, it would not help them a whit. In fact if he reached the Horde he was not at all sure he would be believed.

He was very tired after the exertions of the night. The pleading eyes of Nadesha would not be dismissed from his mind. What was it the girl had said—when two are brothers neither abandons the other?

"Plague take it!" muttered Captain Billings. He jerked his horse's head to the left and trotted into the gullies that led up the slope to the north, toward the Kangar.

"We'll have a return match with Loosang, and it will be a good one."

As if to echo his words, from behind and below him came the blast of the morning trumpet call of Sonkor.

CHAPTER VII

THE AMBUSH

The prudent man crosses the river at the ford; the shrewd merchant when his path leads into the mountains turns aside and seeks a valley.

The foolish one swims his horse across the river, and spurs from peak to peak.

Yet when death comes to the twain, it often happens that the wise man lies in a grave forgotten in the valley while over his head on the mointain summit stands the gold-adorned tomb of him who was unwise.

—Proverb.

FORTUNE, Captain Minard Billings was fond of saying, was very much like a wild horse; it would never wait when you came after it with a halter. But for all that, luck had served him well in many a tight place. And this, perhaps, was because he never waited for fortune to knock at his door.

So it was at the Kara-su, the Black River. This was the stream that marked the boundary between the hills of the Kirghiz and the clay waste of the Kangar. Before it reached the water his pony died. By his calculation he was yet a long day's ride from the Torguts, who, he judged, were moving eastward across the Kangar.

The trail he had been following north and east led down through the foot-hills to a ford—the river at that season in Spring was in flood—and here he fell in with some Tajiks fleeing down the stream. They told him that they had seen the dust of the Horde moving toward the Kara-su from the steppe.

Billings drank his fill, washed, crossed the river and walked briskly toward the steppe. A little more than a mile out, where the familiar gullies began, a camel rider appeared followed by a party of horsemen.

Without more than a curious glance at Billings they pressed ahead; their sweat-darkened beasts had scented the river. Then the sun glimmered on the points of lances and the long barrels of flintlocks. Through the dust, ahorse and afoot, threading the gullies came the Red Camel clan—red, in truth, with the baked dust that coated them. Invisible on either hand, Billings heard the *hoa-hoa* of men driving animals, the scuffle of hoofs, and once the eager cry of a child.

The Horde had sighted the river. Yet the cracked faces of the marchers showed no animation; their eyes were half-closed in a ceaseless squint; some slept in the saddle. They moved steadily on, and the loads they carried were the same with which they had entered the Kangar, a hundred and fifty miles back, four days ago. Billings was enveloped in a sea of moving things.

In order to stop the Horde he must find Norbo. Scrambling up a hillock, he caught sight of Zebek Dortshi in the center of the clan, brilliant in his crimson and velvet.

Billings knew that the Horde was far out of its true course—far to the south. (He suspected that the fact Zebek Dortshi was leading accounted for this.) And on the other side of the river death was lying in wait.

The quick-eyed chieftain noticed Billings' Cossack dress and urged his horse over toward the hillock. Behind Zebek Dortshi came a group of riders, Ubaka in the center. The Khan seemed weary; dried blood caked the corners of his mouth, and his woolen coat was thrown back exposing his knotted, bare chest. Norbo was not to be seen, among the riders who were all *noyons* of the council.

Billings, although Zebek Dortshi was the last man he wished to meet, hastened down toward them and raised his hand. His message could wait no longer.

"I have word for the Khan," he shouted in Russian.

Zebek Dortshi's brown eyes flickered as he recognized Billings, and he spurred his horse to keep between the map-maker and the other Torguts.

"What is your message?" he asked.

But Billings moved aside and caught the eye of Ubaka. The Khan reined in with a frown.

"Where is my son?" he demanded.

The other khans pressed up close to Billings, staring at him and talking together in guttural whispers. They were restless, and he suspected that there had been dissension in the council. He wondered how much Norbo had confessed to Ubaka. Lifting his hand to his forehead in greeting, he spoke.

"May the way be open before you, Ubaka Khan. I have a message from Alashan, from Sonkor."

They were silent at this, all eyes intent. Zebek Dortshi gnawed his mustache and moved his horse nearer to the Englishman, who was now surrounded by a solid ring of riders.

"*Hail* You have gone far and fast. Where is your horse?"

The chief of the Red Camel clan looked around at the others as if to warn them that he discredited Billings.

"Dead, on the other side of the Kara-su."

"The Kara-su! Is that near?"

It was Ubaka Khan who spoke, his deep voice ringing with amazement. Billings reflected that Zebek Dortshi seemed to know where they were, while the Khan did not.

"A mile behind me. Those hills—" Billings turned and pointed to the wooded heights two miles away—"are on the farther bank. I passed through them yesterday. Some shepherds on the river told me the Horde was coming this way. So I waited to give you the word of Alashan."

"Where is my son, that he will not face his father?"

"A prisoner. Nadesha likewise."

The Tatars waited quietly. Even the Khan showed no emotion. Alashan, his son, had left the Horde without permission from his father, and so, in the eyes of the Tatars, both were disgraced accordingly.

Billings pointed to where some armed riders of the Wolf clan were coming along the trail, Norbo among them.

"The Master of the Herds," he said, "can tell you why Alashan left the Horde and why he is in danger."

Now old Norbo was a faithful servant of Ubaka Khan; but he had never learned to shape his words like a courtier. He spoke what was in his mind, when he had to do so. And so he did now. Dismounting, he pressed the stirrup of Ubaka Khan to his forehead and, drawing back, raised a scarred hand to his head and lips.

"Speak," said the Khan.

"Lord, your son saw vultures gathering in the sky. Nadesha, too, had seen. She left me without asking my will and rode to Sonkor. Alashan and this prisoner followed, to learn what was to be found out at the temple of the lamas. He could not go to his father for permission, because he suspected treachery in those about the Khan."

"Treachery!" Zebek Dortshi laughed aloud, twisting the while the curls of his beard with deft fingers. "Aye, it is in my mind that treachery is afoot. Hear my word, O Khan!"

Knowing his listeners, the Persian Tatar paused, until sure that he would be understood. He was a skilful orator.

"Hear my word, Ubaka Khan," he repeated, and he did not give the other the title of Ruler of the Horde. "Is it reasonable to think that those suckling brats, Alashan and Nadesha, would have tried to ride to Sonkor? Captain Billings is the sworn enemy of your son. Would they be comrades, all in a day? Not so."

Smiling, he shook his head.

"Not so. And what word could this *giaour* bring from Sonkor that is not known to Loosang, the all-wise? Bethink you, Khan, did not Loosang warn you against this stranger from beyond the Volga? *Tchu!* He did!"

Then Zebek Dortshi frowned as if scornful of such tricks as Billings might play.

"This is what has happened, members of the *sarga*. The *giaour* has fought with Alashan, perhaps slain him. Aye, to avert the anger of Ubaka Khan the *giaour* has tried to flee. He failed. Then he has made lies, so that his crime shall be overlooked. Loosang, the lama, is all-wise. He foretold that evil would come of the stranger. Cut off the fellow's tongue, pierce his eyes and let us, by the sacred Kandjur, ride on to the water. I have spoken."

"And well—you have said well," cried several of the younger chieftains.

"Speak, *giaour*," snarled Ubaka Khan.

Billings had been waiting for this chance.

"The Khan of the Red Camels lies," he said bluntly. "And here is the proof that the treachery was not of my doing."

He pointed behind him, to where the endless stream of riders was moving through the dust toward the gray glimmer that was the Kara-su.

"The Horde has been led out of its path in the time that I was not with the clans. There lies the Kara-su, the Black Stream. Beyond you can see the mountains, the foothills of the Kara-bagh that mark the territory of the Black Kirghiz. Lake Balkash lies back on your left, and it is far—far. Tell me, who guided you hither?"

All eyes turned toward Zebek Dortshi. But just then was heard the sound of blaring horns and creaking axles. Through the dust came the painted *yurt* of the priests. On the trail abreast the gathering of horsemen it paused. Once more the *gylongs* sounded their horns and waited, in the attitude of heralds.

Loosang appeared in the entrance of his tent house. He wore a purple cassock, and his thin face was ghastly, so that the skin seemed yellow parchment stretched over bones.

"The sleep of nine days has ended," he proclaimed in his high voice. All of the khans except Ubaka—who ranked with the lama—Norbo, and the chieftain of the Bear clan, dismounted and bent to the girdle.

"My spirit, Tatars, has been in the holy places. It has been in the mountains of the *Tsong Kappa*. I have a message for the Torguts. It is this. Continue your journey; drink in peace of the water you see in front of you; camp on the farther bank of the river. Have no fear but I will lead you to Balkash and the valley of the Ili."

A murmur of approval greeted this. The khans stood erect, looked eagerly toward the gleam of water. Zebek Dortshi, well pleased, took snuff.

"By Jove," thought Billings, "the old conjurer can ride. No wonder Zebek Dortshi was sure of his ground—after he had been speaking with the confounded lama."

To the Tatars—those who acknowledged the Dalai Lama—the pallor of the *chutuktu* was ample proof of the long trance to which he had subjected himself.

Norbo, knowing that Billings was a skilled geographer and that Nadesha had set great store by the Englishman's map, drew forth the chart of the steppe that Billings had made. He showed it to Ubaka, and the map-maker explained their position, pointing out how the Horde had left the route to Balkash.

With a word Loosang dismissed it.

"Here are marks upon paper; there is a river and water."

The Tatars shouted approval and glared at Billings. But Ubaka, who had been silent, lifted his head with a roar.

"Quiet, dogs! *Giaour*, have you a token that you have been to Sonkor? For if you have, then this river is verily the Kara-su!"

They snarled, and Zebek Dortshi laid his hand openly on his sword hilt.

"A token?" Billings' eyes blazed. "By my faith, I have one. It is the message from your boy, Alashan."

"A boy," mocked Zebek Dortshi fiercely, "who rides after a girl. Men of the *sarga*, will you listen to the word of a dishonored Tatar——"

"—who may die at the hand of your enemies for sending this word," barked Billings. "Alashan warns you that Nuralin Khan and ten thousand Black Kirghiz are in ambush across that river."

"A lie!"

"Easily proved, my khan. Send patrols into the mountains; and if they come out unhurt I will break my sword and let you cut off my skin, Zebek Dortshi. The Kirghiz were at my heels the last three days." He swung around to face Ubaka. "They hold your son and Nadesha. The lamas hold them. Loosang has betrayed the Horde to Nuralin Khan."

Stirred by this, the Tatars mounted instinctively, and each man felt for his weapons. Ubaka's broad face darkened. His slow brain grappled with the problem while his great hands clenched.

"Proof!" snarled Zebek Dortshi, ignoring the suggestion to explore the land across the river.

"I will give it. Loosang at Sonkor offered the horses and women of the Horde to Nuralin Khan. I heard it, and Alashan too."

"Mad are you," said the Khan of the Red Camels, his brow clearing. "For it is known that Loosang has been within that tent—" he pointed at the purple yurt from which the streamers hung, limp and stained —"for nine days."

"Not so. Alashan stabbed him in the chest when the lama struck Nadesha. Bid Loosang open his cassock and you will see the mark of the wound, fresh and scarce healed."

Loosang alone had remained calm. To Billings' surprize the lama slipped the long garment off his shoulders, and opened a heavy, quilted vest as thick as a man's fist. Over his ribs they could all see the dark red slit in the flesh made by a knife. Billings realized that the quilt had kept the dagger from reaching a vital spot under the ribs. Loosang laid a yellow finger on the seal tranquilly.

"It is true—true—" his high voice broke the silence—"that Alashan stabbed me. True, that the boy was hot with anger because Nadesha, his betrothed, had sought the protection of the gods. Seven days ago, when my body lay in this *yurt*, the boy and the *giaour* entered my wagon by force. Many Tatars saw it."

"True!" echoed the *gylongs* and more than one chieftain.

"Then Alashan stabbed me and fled. You, Norbo, know of that. You saw him fly from the sacred *yurt*."

The old Master of the Herds was speechless, confused by the swift wit of the priest. There was a cry of anger as he failed to deny the charge. Loosang raised his eyes to the sky.

"But my spirit, Tatars, was with the holy ones, at the knees of Bon. So, though my body was cut open, I live. Many times you have seen me cut myself with knives in the rites of Bon, and no harm came to me."

"Alashan!" A groan broke from the cracked lips of Ubaka. Suddenly his broad face grew purple. "By Natagai—by the shades of our ancient heroes in the sky—by the lights of heaven, you are lying, priest. You are a snake and your tongue poison. I believe the word of my son. Get back from the river, you dogs! Halt the clans! Am I Khan or a worm that lives in dung?"

Zebek Dortshi drew his sword, glancing around him.

"Let the *sarga* give its decision," he cried. "Is the council the servant of a mad ox?"

Ubaka rose in his stirrups with a bellow, but Norbo and the chieftain of the Bear clan grasped the reins of his horse. It was too late for sword strokes. Loosang had turned the scales in favor of the Persian. Zebek Dortshi had wheeled his horse and called for the chieftains to follow him to the river.

Sight of the green fields and the shade under the dense forest across the Kara-su were too much for the thirst-tormented Torguts. First one then another put spurs to his horse. The dust rose in clouds.

Riders, who had been awaiting the end of the council, made off full pelt along the clay gullies. Shouts rose and were repeated along the columns of tired Torguts.

"To the river!"

But the *yurt* of Loosang did not move. A twisted, evil face was thrust close to Billings.

"Nadesha and Alashan," whispered Loosang, "are in the hands of a band of my followers, who will let them see the slaying of the Horde. Then my trumpets will sound and the head of the boy will be cut off. But you will be taken again to Bon—again to the arms of the god, to Bon, the Destroyer. I wait for that hour."

With that the priest was gone into his wagon.

A mass of cattle—the last survivors of the herds—came plunging along, joining in the general rush toward water. Billings, the Khan, Norbo and two others who had remained, were forced to mingle with the throng.

THE clay gullies ended about a quarter of a mile from the edge of the flooded Kara-su. Here the ground sloped down evenly to the river. But on the other side there was a scant two hundred yards of lush grass before the forest set in.

Billings scanned the thick screen of alders that merged into the hemlocks, dense overhead yet clear around the trunks, good cover for an ambush. The hills, as if designed for this event, were rolling, a score of valleys opening into the strip of grass-land by the river.

Almost as soon as it began on the farther bank, the trail vanished under the thickets. He could see no sign of men or weapons in the forest—nothing more than the crows that circled overhead erratically.

Norbo, too, noticed the birds.

"My time has come. This dawn when I looked into the sky I felt that I would be called."

Ubaka rode with his head sunk on his bare chest. He seemed not to hear.

"The Horde," he said between his teeth, "that was my grandfather's and his father's, even to the great Genghis—the Horde has no longer a Khan."

The thought that his son had deserted him took all the strength from his body. But the mind of the map-maker was alert. When they reached the top of the slope leading to the water he saw the muskets of the Bear clan, slung over the men's shoulders, like a thicket. The heavy cavalry had kept together, even in the confusion.

"By Jove," he muttered, "I'll make Loosang wait a good while."

The sight of the orderly muskets of the Bear clansmen had roused him and set his wits to work. There was yet time, and something must be done. Only half of the Red Camel riders had crossed the ford. But others were spreading along the bank of the flooded river, looking for places to cross. Every moment brought more Tatars down from the steppe.

Billings could act only by forcing Ubaka Khan to act. And the chieftain had sunk into a kind of stupor. So Billings set his teeth and stooped down to pick up two fistfuls of gravel. The Khan and the men with him had dismounted.

Without warning Billings threw the dirt into the face of Ubaka. It was perhaps the worst insult he could have hit upon. The Khan started and raised his knotted hands quivering above his head.

His eyes grew red. The next instant, however, his head sank again and the clenched fists beat his bare chest instead of striking down the map-maker.

"Aye," he muttered, "it is fitting that that dirt should be cast upon my beard."

Throwing his sheepskin cap on the ground, Ubaka Khan tore at the long scalp-lock that fell over his shoulders.

"The *sarga* has turned its back upon me. When I spoke men laughed. It is the end."

The face of old Norbo writhed in silent anguish at this display of emotion. A Tatar never, of his own will, reveals pain. Billings was amazed by the result of his effort. It shocked him to see passing Tatars laugh at the old man. To them the dirt upon Ubaka's beard and the hair of his chest was only a proof that Zebek Dortshi was now the leader of the Horde.

Then Billings was filled with a cold rage. It was monstrous to watch a whole army, women and children too, ride to death. His own fortunes he had ceased to think of. Fatigue and the exhaustion of the last ride from Sonkor eclipsed everything but the one idea—to rouse Ubaka Khan.

"So," he said bitterly in Russian, "you are a woman. You tear your hair and let men spit upon you. Truly they call you an ox. You let a butcher rip out your throat, and you have not courage enough to draw back. Pah!"

The red eyes of the chieftain were dazed.

"Alashan had my honor in his hand. I trusted him. I would have made him a man."

Norbo laid his hand on Billings' shoulder.

"Forebear, *giaour*."

"Let be, you old dog." The maker of maps shook off the hand. "Do you want Loosang to make Nadesha a temple harlot?"

Seeing Norbo start, Billings pointed to the heavy cavalry.

"Those men will help you hold back the Kirghiz. The Khan is as good as dead, but you and I are still on our feet."

"We can give no command without Ubaka Khan."

"Watch me."

Billings turned to Ubaka and asked bluntly for the signet ring that was the Khan's seal of office. Ubaka shook his head, but allowed the Master of the Herds to draw it off.

"Norbo, this is what we must do within an hour. The riders of the Bear clan are here. Keep them in position. Order the women and children of your own clan to the rear and the men here. What are these two others that kept with us?"

"The chief of the Leopard clan and the master of artillery. We have no artillery."

"Nuralin Khan has."

Billings thought a moment. He noticed for the first time that the ground upon which the Tatars were deploying formed a kind of half-moon, where the Kara-su curved in its course. They were, in fact, on the highest point of a promontory, faced on three sides by the forest and the hills across the river. All of this ground could be raked by cannon from the other bank.

It was a good ambush, that of Nuralin Khan.

"——," muttered Billings. "Norbo, send the chief of the Leopard clan to bring up his armed fighters to the top of this slope. Send the women and children and baggage back along the trail. Order the master of your guns to ride far back along your line of march. When he has reached the clans that have not seen the river and do not know what is happening here, tell him to instruct the khans to muster their able-bodied men and ride forward with them alone."

Norbo moved away stolidly with the ring, and presently Billings saw the two Tatars mount and ride off. From a servant who still attended Ubaka, Billings took a telescope and studied the ant-like figures of the Red Camel Tatars. That clan had crossed the river and the men were moving up slowly into the thickets. Fires were being lit here and there. Saddles were taken from the horses, which were grazing eagerly. Some women were singing.

Boys were gathering brush from the edge of the alders and piling it on the fires. Below him the herd of cattle had reached the river bank and were churning the water into mud. A hot sun blazed down on the grass—still fresh with the moisture of early Summer. Crickets kept up a chorus that was dwarfed by the stamping of horses, the creak of leather and the cries of children.

Norbo, who had been urging the mounted Tatars to charge their muskets and string their bows, returned and wiped the sweat from his eyes.

"Who can stem the course of a torrent?" he grunted. "The Horde will not hold back from the river."

The numbers of soldiers around them had increased; but as Norbo said, the momentum of the mass was too great to be easily halted. More came up from the rear, with only one thought—to gain the shade on the farther bank.

"Hark to the crows," muttered Norbo. "They do not lie—I know, I know. And there goes Zebek Dortshi's red coat into the pines."

"The Red Camel clan is lost," nodded Billings. "There is nothing more we can do."

Then Norbo raised his hand, and the Tatars looked up. From the forest across the river came the blast of a great horn. It echoed down the valley like a brazen gong. Under the screen of the pines a pistol barked. A second time, faintly, the horn sounded.

"The trumpet of the lamas!" cried Norbo. "*Ai-a*—men are in those hills."

All noises had ceased in the Tatar throng. Children looked up at the sky, expecting the sound to be repeated. Men paused in the act of unloading the pack-animals.

In the silence Billings could hear the distant *hoa-hoa* of drivers coming up with camels from the desert trails. But Norbo and his men heard other sounds, drowned until then by the clamor of people around them. Horses neighed over in the hills; brush crackled faintly here and there.

"Men are in those hills," repeated Norbo earnestly, nodding his gray poll. "They are coming this way."

By now Billings could see that the men of the Red Camel clan were gathering into groups. Other clans who had been about to cross the river held back. The lines of riders coming over the steppe were at a standstill. The bronzed faces of the Tatars were intent; they seemed to be trying to smell the air.

The momentum of the marching Horde had ceased. No longer did the drivers back on the steppe cry, "*Hoa-hoa!*"

"Thank God for that horn," thought Billings, wondering how one of the lamas with Nuralin Khan had been so idiotic as to sound a blast before it was time. He judged that the Kirghiz lines had been placed well back in the hills, to allow as many of the clans as possible to cross the river before the attack was made.

He observed that boys were running here and there in the Red Camel gathering, saddling horses, and that the women were moving back toward the river. The men were fingering muskets and watching the line of alders into which more than one scout had plunged at the sound of the shot.

Then from the brush ran a bareheaded man, waving his arms. Through the telescope Billings saw that his *kaftan* was torn to shreds. A crackle of musket shots broke out at the back of the fugitive. The crackling spread along the river, grew to a splitting roar, and smoke began to float up over the pines.

The outcry of the crows was no longer to be heard. The groups of Red Camel men were thinner all at once, for many seemed to sit and lie down. Here and there horses reared. A woman carrying a bundle fell and rolled over, kicking up her booted feet.

In the ford a herdboy slid off the back of a camel into the water and did not appear again. Wailing came to Billings' ears, and a curse sounded from near by. For the most part, however, the Tatars, schooled to misfortune, were silent even under the sting of wounds.

"Look!" cried Norbo, pointing.

At intervals on the heights across the river whole trees fell over. The round, black mouths of cannon peered out at them. At once they flashed, one at a time, and were hidden in dense, white smoke. The balls thudded into the grass or ripped through the mounted Tatars. Some raised great spouts of sand.

Back in the valleys, a half-mile away across the river, the heads of mounted columns appeared. The patter of the muskets continued steadily.

A few feet beneath Billings a little Tatar girl, her head bound in a clean, white kerchief, was standing hugging a doll. It was one of the household images that every Tatar *yurt* possesses. Billings saw the child start and look at her plaything blankly.

Red drops showed on the face of the felt doll. Then the girl began to whimper. All at once she screamed and tried to run back up the bank. Her feet failed her, but Billings picked her up.

She had been shot through the chest, over the heart. Knowing that there was nothing he could do to save her life, he laid the child in a hollow in the bank and mechanically picked up the doll to put in her lap. She continued to whimper more loudly, but could no longer move.

"Loosang will pay for that," Billings promised himself, turning away.

As he was swinging into the saddle of a passing horse he halted, surprized.

Ubaka Khan was again in the saddle. The old Khan had cast off his coat and was bare to the waist. His brown body, heavy-limbed as a bear's, was erect as he stood in his short stirrups to see the better. He had grown taller in the last moments, and his glance was hard and quick.

"Khans of the Torguts," his tremendous voice roared out, "ride to me."

The officers were already doing so. Ubaka glanced around and began to swing his naked sword over his head in a flashing circle of steel.

"Where is the *tugh?* Fetch the standard to me, you curs! Assemble your men, you sheep. Line the ridge with your horsemen."

"Aye," shouted one.

"Tell us what to do, father!" implored another.

"Where is Ubaka Khan—Ubaka Khan?"

Cries were heard in all quarters.

All those on the nearer bank could see the great bulk of the chief under the circle of steel that never stopped swinging.

"*Hai-hai-hai!*" roared Ubaka, seeing the standard approaching. "The Kirghiz have been building a *lopazik*.* We will tear it down. Where are my riders? Let me see their steel! Good, good, you sons of dogs."

Norbo threw back his head and bayed. The shouting was taken up along the line that began to fall in at the summit of the knoll. Norbo hurried off to put himself at the head of his clan.

"Where is Zebek Dortshi?" barked Ubaka. "I will put a blade down his lying throat."

"Master of the Horde," spoke up a man on foot who had been one of the first to run back through the ford, "I went with Zebek Dortshi into the forest. Few were with him. He met a lama and two Kirghiz khans and spoke with them, while his followers were cut down. Then we heard the trumpet blown, and the Kirghiz were angry. One of them shot at Zebek Dortshi. I ran away—because I saw that he had betrayed us, O Khan."

The man eyed Ubaka's broad blade fearfully.

"Lord, Zebek Dortshi when he knew that he was to be slain, put his back against a tree and smote down several who came against him."

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* A platform in a tree from which to shoot game.

"The jackal died like a lion," grunted the Khan. Suddenly he knocked the fugitive sprawling with the flat of his sword.

"Let no Tatar run from an enemy this day. My son spoke a true word. By the name of Natagai, Alashan sent us a true warning. He is the son of my loins. We will charge the Kirghiz."

The old man was drunk with pride and fury. But Billings laid his hand on the arm of the Khan. He pointed to where masses of the black hats were deploying from the valleys along a three-mile front, facing them. And on the ridge itself the Tatar horsemen were suffering from the heavy musket fire. Soon the cannon would be shotted for a second discharge.

"You would be an ox in truth," he said angrily, "to move forward into this trap. Let the Kirghiz cross the river, and hold this ridge meanwhile. They have fifteen thousand musket men and lancers, and you have not two thousand armed men here. Look at those cannon!"

The eyes of the Khan glowed red. Then he quieted and gazed long across the river, where the unfortunate clan was being cut down. He paid no further attention to Billings.

Nor did the massacre of the Red Camel clan and the plight of the Tatars on the farther bank hold his gaze, which sought out only his fighting men. He tugged at his mustache while the bullets began to whistle over the heads of those who were listening for his orders.

"For that word," he said under his breath, "you are a free man, Captain Billings. *Kai*—it is so."

Whereupon Ubaka Khan did a thing that amazed Billings. He ordered all the Tatar cavalry to retreat at once to the steppe.

IF THE stout shade of Starshim Mitrassof could have looked down from the everlasting quarters of the faithful Cossacks in the sky and seen what came to pass on the steppe, no doubt the old colonel would have slapped his ribs and chuckled with glee.

It was not a battle such as European marshals fought. It was the final, desperate struggle of a multitude for life, against a pack that lusted to take life and with life, spoil. For the Kirghiz had achieved the first slaying; they had reddened their swords in the bodies of the doomed clan of Zebek Dortshi, and Nuralin Khan himself had stripped the body of Zebek Dortshi who had once been the hero of the Horde.

And the Black Kirghiz, like wolves, delayed to torture briefly the bodies of the older Tatars, with the children—to violate the younger women who had been caught on the Kara-su, or to snarl over booty loose under their hands. Then they moved forward into the steppe, and behind them came the jackals, the nimble tribesmen of the Kara-bagh, Tajiks, Sarts and robbers generally who had held off until then to see which side would win the opening skirmish.

By retreating at once into the plain Ubaka Khan, if he had been leading European troops, would have thrown his regiments into disorder, turned soldiers into fugitives and laid his supply train open to attack.

But he had no supply train; every man carried what food there was under his saddle. And every Tatar knew how to handle himself in a feigned rout. Two miles back on the waste of clay what had seemed a disordered mob of men became a gathering of armed clans, dust-grimed and grim, and with weapons ready.

Also, they were beyond range of the Kirghiz cannon and out of the net that had been thrown around the bend in the Kara-su. The delay of the Kirghiz in crossing the river had enabled Ubaka Khan to form into clans some eight thousand riders to oppose to nearly twice that number of pursuers.

Windless clouds of dust revealed that camels, cattle, women and children were seeking concealment in the loess gullies or riding to distant springs or climbing to mesas where they could rest and watch the smoke puffs that marked the line of battle. Strings of riders were hastening to the menaced quarter of the Horde.

"They are like bees when you break into the hive," said Billings to himself. "Or beavers, coming to a hole in the dam. But the charges of those black hats must cut them up before they have formed."

The rattle of muskets began again, and the dust stayed in the air. Billings began to perceive that the Tatars were not holding their ground, nor were they being cut to pieces as he feared. The clans fought separately, drawing the Kirghiz on and turning upon them fiercely with arrows and sabers.

The flintlocks of the Tatars, except those belonging to the Bear Clan and the veteran infantry of the Turkish war, were handed to striplings younger than Alashan and to grandfathers whose hands trembled but whose sight was keen.

These held the tops of clay buttes and the sides of dried watercourses, taking cover behind the scrub that covered the breast of the Kangar. Here and there in the groups he saw young girls with bows. They had small, sharp knives thrust through their belts to use on themselves if the Kirghiz should take them.

No one paid any attention to him. As a precaution he had discarded his Cossack hat and coat. He sought for the *yurt* of Loosang until he sighted it standing apart as usual. There were no disciples in evidence this time.

Drawing his sword, Billings made his way through the curtains. He saw the bed of Loosang and on it a tall figure with a hideous face.

"Turned into an image again, by gad," he muttered, gazing down into the mask. "Can't be too sure, though, on my word!"

So he thrust his blade into the effigy of clothes and wool and found that it was, in fact, not Loosang. The lama had disappeared. Sheathing his sword, Billings wandered to a height where he could make use of his telescope. He wanted to find Norbo or Ubaka.

All he could see were countless bands of horsemen, visible when they topped some rise in the plain, and separating into couples above whom steel flashed in the sun when they came together. Here and there men were sitting on the ground, looking for all the world like shrubs. Stricken horses were stretched in front of him as far as the horizon. Already clouds of vultures were gathering against the blue curtain of the sky.

The sun scorched the back of his neck, and the hot sand under him warmed his blood. Captain Billings nodded once or twice and surrendered to drowsiness, having been without sleep for two days and nights.

A HORSE, galloping over him, awakened Billings. He found he was shivering; a cold breath was upon the surface of the steppe, indicating that the middle of the night was passed. Instead of the sun, a huge, orange moon shone down on the carpet of white sand, etching sharply the shadows of the bushes.

Billings staggered to his feet and looked around. The horse had halted in a hollow behind him, where the red glow of a fire revealed a ring of faces. The wind brought to his nostrils the smell of burning flesh. This set every fiber of him to clamoring for food.

Reconnoitering the fire cautiously, Billings made out that the men were Tatars—of the Wolf clan, by their belts. They had cut up the hind quarters of a horse and were roasting the meat over the embers, hardly scorching it before they thrust it into their mouths and gulped it down.

This time Billings did not hesitate to follow their example. He swallowed as much of the smoked meat as he could hold down and asked for water. One of the men pointed behind him; and Billings followed a horse track down a gully, at the end of which in the shadows was a pool of black water.

The sand around the pool was trampled, and Billings had to step over the bodies of the dead. He drank until his thirst was satisfied. Judging that dawn was at hand, he moved out on the steppe toward the nearest height to have a look at his surroundings with the first light. He wanted to get a horse and to find Norbo. He had thrown in his lot with the Horde, and meant to see the thing through.

"It would be a dog trick to ride off the field now," he admitted. "Besides, the show isn't over yet. Hulloa!"

The chills chased up his back. He had been stepping out on the surface of the mound when what seemed to be a dead man perched against a boulder extended a hand that gripped his leg.

"Look," said a Tatar's voice, "before you."

Billings looked and made out several tribesmen squatting in a circle. In the center of the ring was a man on his back. It was Norbo, almost under the mapmaker's feet.

"May the way be open before you, Norbo," observed he cheerfully; but then realized that the Master of the Herds was wounded. His chest was wet with a dark liquid that shone in the moonlight; the air wheezed in his throat, so that he could not speak. Only his eyes moved toward Billings.

Gently as the maker of maps tried to pull the hands of Norbo from his chest, he could not force the Tatar's fingers from the wound, to examine it. So he sat down to wait until Norbo should speak or day should come. Presently the labored breath of the wounded man was still.

"The gate in the sky," cried Norbo. "The gate—it is open!"

Surprized, Billings looked up. Crimson was streaking the sky in the east, and the wind was freshening. A moment later Norbo died.

He had not lived to reach the Ili, but death had brought to his eyes a vision that he had sought during the years of his life. As if the first streaks of dawn had been a signal, muskets cracked and the fighting was resumed on the steppe.

It was impossible to learn how the battle was tending. The wind stirred up the dust devils, and before full light a canopy of sand in the air obscured the sun, while whirling pillars reached up into the gray vault of the sky. Billings wrapped his green neckcloth about his nose and mouth. Over his head he could hear the constant flapping of great wings.

The heat grew more oppressive.

"This is certainly Hades," thought Billings, "and if Alashan and Nadesha have been slain I shall no doubt meet with them."

Whistling to himself, he began to work his way back toward the river, determined to find out what had become of his friends. A horse was sorely needed, yet the poor beasts he met with riderless, were foundered.

However, joining a party of Bear clansmen who were engaging a similar number of Kirghiz, he used his sword with such effect that the captain of the Tatars pointed out a fresh horse, and stopped long enough to answer Billings' question as to the battle.

"The jackals have left the pack," he said grimly, meaning that the outlaw tribes had deserted the Kirghiz, so Billings judged that the Tatars were more than holding their own.

He glanced curiously at the Cossack dress of the map-maker.

"By the Heavens, good sir, you know how to use a sword. Come with us and you shall see Ubaka Khan himself, who is seeking out Nuralin Khan. We will duck that head-of-flame in the waters of the Kara-su where he set a trap for us."

Following the *noyon*, Billings came out of a gully into a mob of horsemen, Tatar and Kirghiz, without semblance of rank, hacking and stabbing at each other, the whole mass moving down the slope toward the river.

The charge of the tribesmen had reached the nucleus of soldiers that Nuralin Khan had formed about him during the night, and the Kirghiz had given ground before the whirling attack of the Tatars. On the steep clay slope the momentum of the horses could not be checked. Billings' beast was caught in the current and in a trice he was at the edge of the river.

In front of him the Kirghiz were swimming their horses across or crowding for the ford. The thirst-tormented animals lingered to drink of the muddy and blood-stained water. Neither side had pistols or muskets in use, so a pause ensued in which Billings made out the figure of Nuralin Khan, hatless, on the farther bank.

"Stop, dog, skulker, slayer of prisoners—" Ubaka Khan had heard from captives of Loosang's act in bringing Alashan and Nadesha to the river to be killed—"stand and await the ox!"

The eyes of the old Khan were sunk in his head, and blood dripped from his mouth. Billings could not understand how the man kept going, naked to the waist as he was in the heat that sapped human strength. Followed by lines of Torguts, Ubaka plunged his horse into the river and swam it across.

Nuralin Khan looked about him, saw his followers hanging back at the edge of the thickets, and remained where he was. To flee would be dangerous. If he could cut down Ubaka it would take the sting out of the Torgut attack, and he could then hold the line of the river.

As Ubaka trotted toward him, Nuralin raised his red head and cast a lance. The old Torgut was watchful and slipped to one side in the saddle, allowing the shaft to flash past his ribs. The belt of Nuralin Khan was still filled with an assortment of weapons; for an instant he hesitated which to draw.

And now a strange thing happened. Ubaka's sword was in its scabbard. Seeing this, the red-headed khan took his time. He drew out a long pistol, cocked it, sighted and pulled the trigger. Ubaka was not ten feet away. The onlookers heard the click of steel striking flint, but there was no report. The plunge across the ford had dampened the priming in the weapon.

Quickly Nuralin Khan dropped the useless firearm, and his hands darted to knife and sword hilt. At the same time the Torgut chief reached forward and caught the wrists of his foe, pinning them down.

"Slayer of my son," he said slowly, "taste what ye have stored up for others."

With the words, he leaned toward the Kirghiz, putting the whole of his strength into his grip. The face of Nuralin Khan grew redder slowly. Once he spat into the eyes of Ubaka. But the old Torgut had no need to see what was to be done. The muscles behind each shoulder blade stood out in cords down to his belt. His head sank as his shoulders stiffened.

Billings saw the hands of Nuralin Khan wrenched loose from the weapon hilts. The Kirghiz was bent back over the high crupper of his saddle until his fingers quivered and his teeth gritted as the wooden edge cut into the small of his back.

Meanwhile he had succeeded in freeing his feet from the stirrups. Maddened by pain, he twisted to win free, failed, and struck his pony in the neck with a spurred heel. The horse started forward. And Ubaka changed his grip.

One of his vise-like hands thrust under the beard of the Kirghiz giant; the other fastened behind the head. As the pony slipped out from under the Kirghiz and the man fell back, Ubaka gave a wrench.

Billings heard two sharp snapping sounds. One of Ubaka's stirrups had broken under the strain, and the neck of Nuralin Khan had broken.

The Torgut let the body of his enemy fall to earth and looked at it a while, breathing heavily. Without drawing a weapon the Khan of the Torguts had slain an experienced fighter, heavily armed and desperate.

To escape the rush of the Torguts, the Kirghiz who had been awaiting the fate of their leader fled into the forest. As his men came up, Ubaka halted them.

"Find Loosang," he commanded.

This suited Billings exactly, and he followed the others up the mountain slope along a track beaten down by the Kirghiz. Regardless of the fighting still going on to the right and left, the Tatars pressed on. The head of Ubaka Khan nodded as he rode. and the Khan from weariness slept in the saddle. But he was alert at any noise near by.

A sulking Tajik pointed out the way that Loosang had taken, up one of the gorges, and before long they sighted the blue robe of a priest fluttering into the bushes ahead of them. With a cry the Tatars spurred on.

The bushes gave upon a clearing surrounded on all sides by pines, from which the whole of the Kara-su could be seen far below them. Here the *gylong* was cornered, but he was not Loosang.

No one paid any attention to him at first. In her bedraggled garments of the temple, Nadesha faced them, a knife in her small fist and her brown eyes glowing with hatred, until she caught sight of their Tatar dress and the big bulk of Ubaka Khan.

On the ground at her feet lay Alashan. One arm was thrown across his eyes as if to shield them from the sun. His right hand gripped the length of a lama's long trumpet midway between mouthpiece and flare.

Beside him was stretched the lifeless body of a *gylong*. The grass of the clearing was trampled and crushed as if many feet had stood upon it and moved about.

Without a word Ubaka Khan thrust aside those in front of him and dismounted, bending over the form of his son. Nadesha fell on her knees and attempted to free Alashan's hand from the horn.

"See, my lord," she said, "with this trumpet Alashan slew the *gylong* who lies here. Then they struck at him with swords so that he fell."

"Tell your story," ordered Ubaka.

"You have heard the tale of Captain Beel-ing, my lord." She looked at the mapmaker and then down at the boy. "You know that we were brought here, captives. The lama, Loosang, would not entrust me to any but his own men. They told us we would see the Tatar clans surprized at the fords of the Kara-su. Alashan said no word to me of what he meant to do."

She pointed down at the river.

"Here we were stationed, under guard of the lamas. When the first clan of the Horde crossed the river, the men from Sonkor began to watch eagerly through the trees. Those who had Alashan between them also watched. One he pushed aside and from the other he wrested this horn, which sounds a great blast. He blew it, once loudly, then again, before they cut him down."

"Ha!"

"It made the priests very much afraid, because they believed that Nuralin Khan would ride upon them and kill them for permitting the warning to be given. So they ran away into the bushes; but Nuralin Khan did not come because the fighting began almost at once. I waited here, keeping the sun from Alashan, who is sorely hurt."

Then for the first time Ubaka Khan's hand felt of the chest of the boy, and his fingers were thrust into the cuts to learn how deep they might be. Under the rude touch Alashan writhed and opened his eyes.

"Build you a horse litter," the Khan commanded his followers, "and see that he is taken to my tent. Tell the women to dress his wounds, for they are deep and half the blood is out of his body. But he will not die, for he is strong—strong."

Ubaka rose, and he held his chin high. Then the Tatar nobles spoke the words for which he was listening.

"The boy is a man in all things," they said, one after the other. "He is wise, because he saw the trick that we did not see. . . . Alone he went among our enemies. . . . They could not kill him. . . ." He is a khan.

"*Ahatou—Alashan!*" they repeated.

Even as they spoke a blue-clad figure crept from among the Tatars and began kissing the boots of Ubaka Khan. It was the *gylong*, and his face was quivering with a fearful eagerness.

"Oh mighty Khan, ruler of unexampled benovelence—fortunate father of such a son —spare my life! You follow Loosang, and I saw where he went. It was that way!"

The priest pointed into the pines. Ubaka looked at him a moment in silence. Suddenly he stooped, caught up the bronze horn in one hand. Lifting it above his head, the Khan brought down the heavy end on the crown of the *gylong*.

The skull of the traitor was crushed inward. Ubaka hurled the trumpet into the bushes and strode toward his horse. The sight of his son had driven all thought of Loosang for the moment from his mind.

"The men have called him khan," he repeated to himself. "So, he shall ride with me."

Down below them the firing had died out at last, and the Tatars were in possession of the river. But Billings had not forgotten the lama. He had noted carefully the direction the *gylong* had pointed out, and now turned to see how Alashan was faring. To his surprize the eyes of the boy were fastened on him. He beckoned Billings nearer.

"My father has called me a man," he whispered. "I give you thanks and honor for your ride to the Horde with the word of peril. And when my wounds are healed you and I will cross swords until one of us lies on the ground. I have sworn it."

His glance strayed to Nadesha.

Billings started to laugh and then grew thoughtful. He explained to the boy that, although he liked Nadesha immensely, he did not woo her, and that Nadesha herself loved only the son of the Khan. But Alashan shook his head.

"She has made you her *anda*, and henceforth her life must belong to one of us only. The swords will point the way."

By now the litter of boughs was finished, and Alashan was placed on it. The movement rendered him unconscious. As the Tatars were slinging the litter between two ponies, Billings, who had been standing in a brown study, glanced at the boy, but, perceiving that he was beyond reach of words, turned to Nadesha.

"I am not going to fight Alashan," he said in Russian, "after all this. There is a way out. I am leaving the Horde. Ubaka has said that I am no longer a prisoner." He pointed to the unconscious boy. "See, the son of the Khan wears your girdle, Nadesha."

For an instant her brown eyes dwelled in his, and she held out a slim hand.

"May the way be open before you, my brother."

But even as she spoke, she hurried after the litter, scolding the men for shaking the boughs and urging them to ride carefully. Billings thought briefly of his belongings—if they still existed—somewhere in the Horde, and of horses, supplies, necessary for his hazardous trip back along the road of the Torguts.

Ubaka, however, was out of sight, and there was something Billings planned to do that would not wait.

AN HOUR later Billings had reached the edge of a ravine where the boles of the great hemlocks were close together and their branches formed a roof that made the light dim. For some time he had followed a faint track that had now lost itself among the rocks. Down the steep bottom of the gorge a stream rushed and roared in a series of falls.

Scanning his surroundings carefully, Billings strained his ears for any sound that might lead him to what he sought. The only movement he detected was that of some kind of a panther on a ledge under him. He could see the hide through a nest of rocks, and once he looked into its muzzle, raised toward him.

For a while he studied what he could see of the thing, and then smiled broadly.

"Gad, 'twill bear closer scrutiny!"

He tightened his sash and drew his rapier, laying the scabbard aside. Sliding, and lowering himself over the boulders, he made his way down to the ledge beside the fall of the stream.

He was within arm's reach before the hide slipped off the back of the false panther, and Loosang rose to his feet, pulling off his mask as he did so. For a moment the two regarded each other.

The lama was half-naked, the scars prominent on his tall frame. Over his waist hung an apron of skin, but his hands were empty.

"I have no weapon," he said slowly. "Come, Captain Billings, we have no quarrel, you and I. You are a *giaour*—I, a priest. We are wiser than the Tatars. Instead of fighting, we can share wealth together."

As Billings did not answer, he went on quickly.

"You do not believe me. But it is so. I have taken gold and silver coins enough from the Tatars to make you a rich landowner with serfs."

"I do not doubt it. But now we are going to fight—you and I—with our hands, if you have no weapon."

Loosang's lined face puckered. Billings never took his eyes from the lama's.

"Captain Billings, you are not a fool—although some would call you so. Each week, on the road of the Horde, I buried a large bag of Russian money—an official's salary, each time—under the stones of the shrines that were built where my *yurt* stood. I can retrace the course of the Tatars."

The lama broke off, his lips tightening. He had forgotten, as he spoke, the map that Billings had made. His hands fell to his sides.

"You see I am telling the truth. And you have seen the power of the Sonkor lamasery." Sweat glistened on his bald forehead, but his eyes were bold. "If I return there, safe, I can turn the tables on my enemies. It would be worth a fortune to you—and escort back to Russia."

"I don't think you have any second, to serve in this duel," interrupted Billings coldly, "unless you wish to call in your friend the devil. And we can dispense with a surgeon."

For the first time Loosang laughed.

"*Ekh*, after all you are a fool. Do you not know yet that steel can not hurt a lama? What will you fight me with? That sword——"

With the words, Loosang cast himself at Billings. His hand darted under his apron and flew up again. In each fist was clasped a long knife. Lifting these over his head, he leaped.

And Billings, leaning forward, thrust his sword through the body of Loosang under the heart.

As he made the thrust he drew to one side, catching the lama's right wrist in his left and avoiding the downward sweep of the other arm. For a space he held the form of the priest passive, while Loosang squealed between set teeth. Then he drew out his blade, pushing the body clear of it, over the ledge into the rush of the falls.

He caught only one slimpse of brown limbs flashing down through green water. But presently over his head he heard men calling, and the scrape of boots on the rocks.

Billings' position on the side of the stream was bad if he was to be attacked, so he climbed up the slope as best he could and came out within a detachment of riders who clustered about his empty scabbard.

They were tribesmen, unknown to him. There were a round dozen of them, and he judged they had been raiding because they had with them several led horses, one a beautiful Kochlani mare; the other two beasts were loaded with skins, silver ornaments and a large simitar, splendidly etched with gold.

One of them, their leader apparently, held gingerly what seemed to be a roll of paper. Billings surveyed them until the headman dismounted and knelt, holding up the roll of paper.

"Billings, lord," he said in guttural Tatar, "we are ten and two men of the Yeka Zukor clan that was overcome in Russia and led back to the Volga. Our hearts inclined toward our kin. So Ubaka Khan this day commanded us to seek you out and serve you, under pain of having our limbs pulled from our bodies by horses. We will go back with you to the Volga."

He laid down the object he held in his hands, with a good deal of relief.

"Here, lord, is the map you made of our road. Here—" he pointed—"is a sword of honor from Ubaka, and a horse, and other things. Also your magic things for looking at the stars. We are ready. Say the word and mount and go."

Billings laughed.

"Mount—and come."

Half-way down the mountain they halted to look out over the plain. The long lines had formed again among the clans; the dust rose over the camel caravans. He could see the sun reflected on the muskets as the riders took up their journey to the east and the valley of the Ili. He could almost hear the *hoa-hoa* of the drivers, the shuffling of the cattle and the creaking of the wagons.

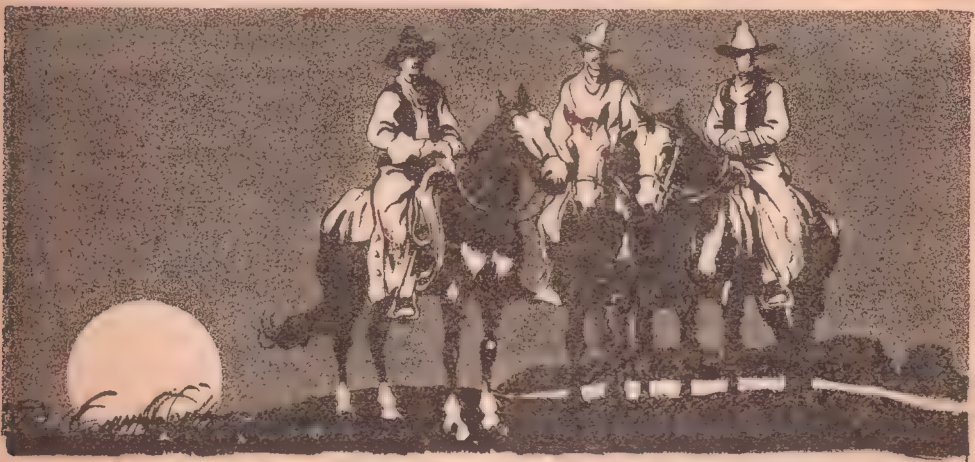
So it happened that Captain Billings watched the passing of the Torguts along the road that led to the Ili. No other *giaour* set eyes on them again. But it is written in the annals of Keun-lung that those of the clans that survived the journey gained lands and peace in the valley of the Ili.

After sheathing his sword Billings rode on toward the setting sun. But the Tatar at his side had seen blood stains on the steel blade.

"Has my lord slain an enemy in the gorge?" he asked with interest.

Billings smiled.

"I cut off the head of a snake."



THE LAW-BRINGERS

by Frederick R. Bechdolt

Author of "Boot Hill," "Tascosa," etc.

IN THE Spring of 1880, when this tale begins there was no law beyond the Pecos River, which cuts across Texas and New Mexico.

In that wild land west of the Llano Estacado a few big cattlemen held sway in very much the same manner as the rude old barons who gave Europe a hard name during the middle ages. They raided one another's herds and when they wanted to get rid of an enemy they ordered him slain. To their banners, upraised in wars for range, flocked men who had been outlawed in older communities for deeds of blood. Occasionally a band of these killers roved through the country making alliances with cowmen who happened to need more stock or wanted to get rid of rivals.

Of those who believed in the law there were a few; and in Lincoln County, New Mexico, they had succeeded in electing their candidate for sheriff.

Pat Garret was his name, a former buffalo-hunter from the Staked Plains. But when he took the office he found himself unable to raise a posse against the most notorious of the desperadoes, upon whose head the Governor of the Territory of New Mexico had set a price.

Then, on a raw day in the early Spring, this outlaw, whom men called Billy the Kid, rode down from the Mescallero Mountains to talk business with the Cattle King of Tularosa.

In the home ranch-house at Three Rivers the ruddy-faced old Irishman, whose herds ranged over two hundred miles of arid flats and pine-clad peaks, received the beardless youth who carried a thousand dollars and the blood of eighteen dead men on his head. And after supper was over they sat at the oilcloth-covered table with a bottle of whisky between them while the Scotch couple who did the work about the place sat by and listened to their dickering.

Now and again Pat Coghlin passed the bottle and bade his visitor fill up. Always he filled his own glass to the brim and drank its contents at a gulp.

"Red liquor never hurt no one," he declared.

He was a fine, big man; and his voice boomed as he made the statement. The outlaw's buck teeth gleamed in a good-natured smile of acquiescence, but he contented himself with stingy thimblefuls. Having to attend to his own killings and guard his own person, he found it prudent in those days of the quick draw to observe the asceticism to which his more prosperous host was never forced. He slouched in his chair, lank-haired, more than a trifle ragged, as negligently graceful as a cat. His voice came in thin high contrast to the bass of the thick-chested cattle king as he went on to tell of the project which had brought him here.

"Big young steers," he said, "and they'll be hog fat when the grass comes."

"Beef's going down this Spring," Pat Coghlin announced, "and them cowmen of the Canadian is —— on looking after strays."

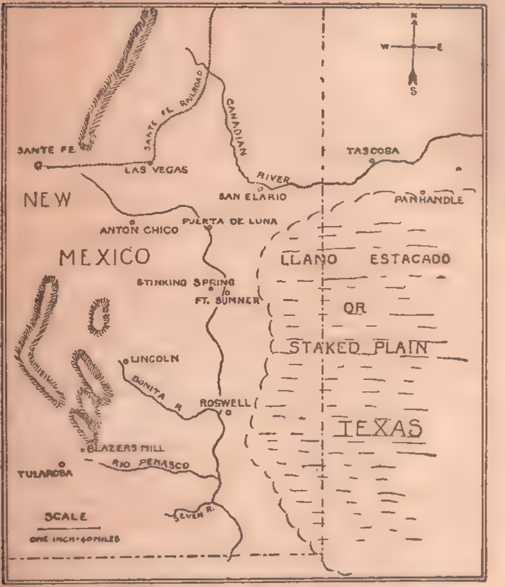
So they had it back and forth while George Nesbeth, the Scotch caretaker, rested after the day's work and his wife finished the supper dishes. Such deals were very common in those times; and the Cattle King of Tularosa was a power from Las Cruces clear to Santa Fé; the outlaw was accustomed to riding unchallenged where he willed; they knew no reason why they should lower their voices.

In the end they came to an agreement. The cowman was to buy all the Panhandle steers which his guest could deliver within the limits of his far-flung dominions. From Portales Lake at the breaks of Llano Estacado where the drifting herds of the Canadian found refuge during Winter storms to the military post at Fort Stanton where Pat Coghlin sold beef by contract to the Government, was a long way farther than the most vengeful of owners had dared to follow rustlers in the lawless land west of the Pecos. It looked like a good bargain for the Cattle King. As for Billy the Kid, why it took money to play monte and buy cartridges. So both men went to bed well satisfied.

A YEAR went by. Elsewhere the story has been told; how the cowmen of the Panhandle sent a dozen young warriors on the trail of the herd which the outlaw had rounded up at Portales Lake, and how half the band joined forces with Sheriff Pat Garret to hunt down the thieves.

It was in December when they captured Billy the Kid at Stinking Springs after slaying two of his companions. Now in early March he was lying in jail under sentence of death for an old killing; and by the irony of fate the Cattle King of Tularosa was off chasing rustlers who had dared to pillage his own herds, when three of those warriors of the Canadian rode up from the roaring young mining town of White Oaks into the nest of mountains where Fort Stanton lies.

Ever since their comrades had departed on the man-hunt with Pat Garret they had been seeking tidings of the lost herd. In White Oaks they had got a hint which pointed toward the military reservation. On just such a raw day as that on which the desperado had ridden down to drive his bargain at the Three Rivers ranch-house, they reined up their ponies on the parade ground. On the fence before them hung a row of green hides. They read the brands of their employers on them.



WHITE OAKS IS AMONG THE MOUNTAINS NORTHWEST OF LINCOLN, AND LAS CRUCES IS ABOUT SEVENTY MILES SOUTHWEST OF TULAROSA. THE RIVER BISECTING THE MAP IS THE PECOS.

Now two of the trio returned to White Oaks; and Charley Siringo, the wagon boss, rode on alone into the country where Pat Coghlin ruled like an old feudal baron. From the tangle of summits he came down to the warmer low lands where the stock was wandering.

Now and again he paused to read the brands in a bunch or turned aside to seek out a band which had wandered into some foot-hill cañon. So he came on, stopping where night found him, making himself at home with such hosts as gave him shelter. Once a fandango held him for two days in a hamlet of Mexican adobes, and once he dallied with a pair of hard-eyed rustlers who offered him good pickings if he would "throw in with them" in their next venture. It is not likely that either the dark-skinned *vaqueros* with whom he gossiped while the guitars were strumming, or the cow thieves whom his lean fitness had intrigued into seeking his alliance, noticed how he asked three questions where he answered one; for he owned a ready *camaraderie* which disarmed all suspicions.

By the time he reached Tularosa he had gathered much information concerning the methods of the Cattle King. Here they told him of Pat Coghlin's expedition; and if the news of that man-hunt aroused any amusement within him after what he had learned, he showed no sign of it.

"The ol' man done struck off toward the Rio Grande," they said. "Like's not you'll find him over at Las Cruces."

So he took the trail across the White Sands desert and traveled through the ghastly dunes where savage men had plied the trade of murder from the days of the first Spanish settlements. He passed the Organ Mountains and crossed the lower reaches of the Journado del Muerto, where Nature in an ugly mood had slain her victims with greater wantonness than the renegades who lurked among the pallid hills. In Las Cruces he met the Cattle King of Tularosa returning from a bootless chase and revealed to him his errand.

"The balance of the boys," he said, "are in White Oaks. We aim to round up those steers and make the drive back to the Canadian as early as we can."

If he had come for war his manner did not show it. Pat Coghlin led the way to the nearest bar, where he downed his drink and wiped his coarse lips with the back of his hand.

"If you boys go to cutting my herds now before the grass comes," he said, "it's plumb sure to raise —— with 'em."

They talked the matter over, and he gave his promise to butcher no more Panhandle steers if the warriors of the Canadian would withhold operations until April.

Such transactions were common enough in a day when most of the big cowmen bought openly from rustlers. If the visitor came to you well organized, it was cheaper to let him recover his property than to show fight; you charged the salvaged animals to profit and loss and let it go at that. So Charley Siringo saw no reason to question the good faith of the big Irishman.

He rode away from Las Cruces and back across the White Sands. In Three Rivers he stopped overnight at the home ranch, and Mrs. Nesbeth cooked his supper. After the meal he sat talking with her and her husband. Billy the Kid's name was spoken more often than that of any man in New Mexico at the time; so it was natural enough that it should be mentioned by the guest.

News traveled slowly then; the Scotch couple knew nothing of the circumstances surrounding the outlaw's capture. When Siringo told them how the Kid's downfall was due to those stolen cattle they looked at each other in meaning silence. Then their eyes went to their guest, and the freemasonry which exists among honest people when they are in a minority loosened their tongues. They told him of the bargain which they had overheard in this room a year before.

The wagon boss departed for White Oaks the next morning. He had traveled for some hours and was well up in the mountains when he learned more concerning the methods of the Cattle King of Tularosa.

Where the trail described a long loop on the flank of snow-clad peak he left it to take a short cut. The snow was hard as ice on the steep side-hill. He was watching the ground closely lest his horse should make a misstep, when the animal went down in a heap, and he heard the flat report of a Winchester above him. A second shot sounded just as he was leaving the saddle.

He fell over a low shelf of rock and lay there with his revolver in his hand while the two Mexicans who had been sent to kill him peeped over a clump of brush. Finally they rose and went across the ridge. It was evident that they believed they had got him. He allowed them to depart under that impression and made his own way back to White Oaks, where a letter from the Nesbeths reached him a few days later telling him that Pat Coghlin was continuing to butcher the Panhandle cattle.

All of these facts Charley Siringo wrote to Bill Moore, the manager of the L X outfit, and when the tidings reached Tascosa the cattlemen of the Canadian held a conference. It was plain to see that so long as this sort of thing continued in New Mexico they might send forth their fighting men every Winter; but every Spring would find a fresh crop of rustlers to replace those whom the warriors had exterminated. They decided that it was time to bring the law west of the Pecos River.

So it came that April saw another horseman riding alone through the wild dominions of the Cattle King of Tularosa. On foot or in the saddle he made a splendid figure, for he was well over six feet in height, broad-shouldered, straight as a young pine-tree. And if you looked into his blue eyes you knew that, once he started for a goal, he meant to reach it.

A Kentuckian by birth and a Texan by right of experience, his name was John W. Poe. During the early seventies when the great bison herds used to roam the Llano Estacado and the Comanche war-parties were abroad during every light moon, the buffalo-hunters knew him as one to whom it was no feat of marksmanship to break a bull's neck at six hundred yards. In Fort Griffin's palmy days he impressed his personality upon the populace by disarming Jim Oglesby, a noted bad-man from the Indian Territory, with his bare hands.

The people chose him for town marshal in '78, and he enhanced his prestige by many deeds of quiet boldness. One wild night, when it looked as if the power of the statutes was broken in the frontier town, he stood alone between a mob which filled the main street and his prisoner whom they had come to lynch. His eyes were serene with faith as he told them that, although they might kill him, the law would still remain to exact justice. Before his calm inflexibility the armed crowd wavered and melted away.

He came to Mobeetie on the Canadian in 1880, and the reputation born of these exploits followed him. He lived up to it in the Panhandle metropolis; and so the cattlemen picked him to carry the law, in which he placed so deep a faith, into this country to the west where men were making mock of it.

For a large man he was remarkably unobtrusive; he owned a reticence which effaced him from others' notice like one of those magic robes in the Arabian Nights whose wearers were invisible. And when he came to White Oaks he made the journey by way of Dodge City and the railroad, entering the lawless young mining town, as it were, by the back door. Wherefore it happened that none of Pat Coghlin's henchmen knew of his presence.

There were many of these; hardly a week went by but one of them slipped through the night to meet the Cattle King of Tularosa under a certain big cottonwood-tree in front of the ranch house and report what he had seen—or done—out in the mountains or the pallid sand-hills. But none of them brought tidings of John W. Poe.

Of the law-loving men who lived beyond the Pecos there were a few who knew something of his comings and goings. Sheriff Pat Garret met him in more than one quiet conference. The officer in charge of the military post at Fort Stanton talked with him. George Nesbeth and his wife told him their story under the Cattle King's nose in Three Rivers. In Las Cruces he showed his data to A. J. Fountain, the lawyer whom he had retained to help prosecute Pat Coghlin. These and one or two others who were in the secret were beginning to pluck up heart and to hope for a day when the big cattle-thieves would respect the rights of property and the outlaws would take to cover.

By this time the warriors of the Canadian had gathered the survivors of that stolen herd from Pat Coghlin's ranges and were driving them up the Pecos Valley. Poe had rounded up enough facts to convince the most timid of grand juries of the Cattle King's part in the conspiracy. In fifteen days more the hangman would meet Billy the Kid at the gallows steps. That was the propitious state of affairs on the twenty-eighth day of April, when something happened which changed all plans and dashed high hopes.

THAT morning Sheriff Pat Garret left Lincoln to confer with John W. Poe in White Oaks regarding the case against Pat Coghlin. Before he departed from the county seat he went to the two-story adobe building which had been Murphy & Dolan's store during the Lincoln County war days and was now being used as the court-house. He entered the room on the upper floor, where Billy the Kid was lying with irons on his wrists and ankles and two jailors watching him. The prisoner looked up, and if the nearness of that day when he would meet the hangman was on his mind he did not show it; his smile was care-free.

"Hello, Pat," said he.

The sheriff regarded him from beneath drooping eyelids.

"Howdy, Kid," he answered in his habitual undertone; then, turning to Bob Ollinger who was on guard:

"Bob, I'm going over to White Oaks," he announced, "and while I'm away—" he made a little gesture to include J. W. Bell, the other jailor who happened to be in the room at the time— "I want you boys to keep just twice as close a watch as you have kept before."

Bob Ollinger laughed grimly. Ever since the early days of the Lincoln County war he and the desperado had been bitter enemies; it was one of those blood-born feuds which blood alone can wipe out.

"Don't worry, Pat."

He rose as he was speaking and went to a closet at the other end of the room. He unlocked the door and turned to face them with a double-barreled shotgun in his hand. His eyes were fixed on the prisoner.

"There's eighteen buckshot in each of these barrels, and I reckon the man that catches them will know it."

He patted the weapon, and when he was replacing it the outlaw called his name.

"Bob, better be careful or you might get those buckshot yourself."

He was smiling as he said it. There was a peculiar quality in that smile of his, a boyish ingenuousness which disarmed suspicion. But Pat Garret's lids drooped a little lower and his lips clamped down tighter, so that they barely let his words out.

"Remember, boys. Twice as careful."

He nodded at the prisoner.

"So long."

And with that he left them to make his journey to White Oaks.

The guards settled down to the day's monotonous routine which the sheriff's visit had interrupted. Bob Ollinger resumed his seat facing the cot where his charge lay shackled hand and foot. A good three yards of floor space separated them. Had he been endowed with a keen sense of the ridiculous the length of that interval might have struck him as absurd under the circumstances. But he was not a humorous man, nor was he at all imaginative. He sat there in silence, regarding Billy the Kid like a bulldog who has been set to watch a man.

Several cowboys who were awaiting trial for a shooting scrape were playing cards out in the hallway at the head of the stairs. Occasionally an oath or a burst of laughter came from the group to break the room's stillness. Ollinger remained immobile in his armchair. The lank-haired youth stole a glance at him now and then from the cot, and his lips curved, showing his big buck teeth. It was as if the sight of his jailer aroused pleasant speculations.

So the day passed and at five o'clock in the afternoon Bell appeared to take his turn on watch. Ollinger gave up his armchair and called to the cowboys.

"All right, boys; supper-time."

They followed him down the stairs and across the street to a little Mexican eating-house, jesting after the manner of their care-free breed. He laughed with them and answered their badinage with good-natured profanity. Restraint had passed from him when he left that upper floor room.

Bell sat in the armchair watching the long-haired boy with irons on his limbs, who smiled so easily. In the room's dimness the face on the cot showed sharp and white. In part that lean pallor came from the long confinement; but starvation had heightened it. During the past few weeks Billy the Kid had eaten next to nothing. Men thought it was because he had the hangman on his mind.

"There's a Las Cruces paper came to-day," he said at length. "I wisht you'd leave me read it."

Bell caught the smile which accompanied the request, and his own lips relaxed a trifle as he rose to get the weekly where the cowboys had left it. When he returned the prisoner made no effort to reach for it; his hands were beneath the bedclothes.

"One of them punchers was saying something about a shooting down Three Rivers way. Find that item for me, will you? I can't make out to turn the pages with these —— hobbles on me."

The big teeth were revealed by another of those boyish smiles.

Bell hitched his chair a little closer, and when he had unfolded the paper so that its outspread pages formed a screen between them, Billy the Kid performed a maneuver which he had been practising ever since he had starved himself to sufficient leanness. If there was any clink of metal the bedclothes muffled it. The good-natured deputy was scanning the closely printed columns for that imaginary item when some sound or other reached his ears, and he glanced up over the paper's top to see the outlaw's eyes looking down into his own less than a foot away.

Bell reached toward his revolver. Before the movement was fairly begun the prisoner's hand, now freed from its manacles, had grasped the weapon and plucked it from the holster.

The chair went over with a crash. The deputy made one futile step toward the desperado; then turned to flee. Billy the Kid lowered the barrel of the six-shooter with a deliberation which allowed the other to reach the door before he pulled the trigger. The air within the close walls shook before the explosion.

Bell staggered out through the doorway and fell headlong down the stairs. He was dead when he reached the bottom. Old Geiss, the regular jailer, was sitting on the lowest step when the body struck him. He ran into the street shouting the alarm.

When the party in the little eating-house heard the shot Bob Ollinger sprang to his feet and rushed out. He saw the jailer coming toward him and heard his shout. He ran on across the roadway. Then a thin high voice above his head halted him.

"Hello, Bob," the voice said.

It came from a window on the second floor of the adobe court-house, which opened on a little balcony. Bob Ollinger looked up. The sash was thrown wide. He saw the double-barreled shotgun which had been the subject of their grim repartee that same morning, slanting down toward him, and behind the gleaming barrels, pressed close beside the stock, he saw Billy the Kid's face. The cowboys who were watching from the eating-house door said afterward that the outlaw was smiling when he pulled the trigger. The weapon roared and Bob Ollinger pitched forward, dead.

It took Billy the Kid two hours to file his leg shackles, for he went at the work very deliberately there on the little balcony. By the time he had come forth from the room where he had been lying a prisoner all these weeks, more than a score of well-armed men were gathered in a tight pack across the street. None of them raised a hand to stop him. Two cartridge-belts swathed his body, and two six-shooters dangled by his hips; he kept a Winchester standing beside him.

But these weapons, which he had got from the closet with the shotgun, were not the only menace which was working on that crowd to keep its members acquiescent. The memory of the Lincoln County war in which the desperado had been the leader of the losing faction was still fresh here, where some of its hardest battles had been fought. Many of the audience were openly in sympathy with him. It would need a bold man to raise his voice against proceedings and a bolder one to lift a hostile hand.

So when he had released his limbs, a man hurried at his bidding to saddle up a pony.

They all stood by while he mounted and, at his bidding, there were some who cheered him as he rode away.

Those were hard days. It is a fact that when the news of his escape reached the band of Canadian warriors who were driving the recovered cattle up the Pecos, Frank Clifford let out a whoop and jumped into the river for sheer joy.

IN WHITE OAKS on the day after the jail-break Pat Garret was talking with John W. Poe over the evidence which the latter had gathered against the Cattle King of Tularosa when a messenger rode up and told them the news. The two men stood silent until the rider had finished his bloody story.

"I'll saddle up and strike out for Lincoln," Pat Garret said in his habitual undertone.

Poe nodded. They parted without more words. It was no time for talk; and if it had been, their gifts did not run in that direction.

The sheriff returned to the county seat to take up the outlaw's trail and follow it to the flanks of El Capitán Peak. There it vanished so completely that the Apache trackers whom he got from the Mescallero agency were unable to find any trace of it.

It was, as has been said, a hard era; and there were many men in New Mexico who sympathized with the fugitive. Some of them genuinely believed that the big cowmen, who had openly allied themselves with rustlers and professional gunfighters, were the only real culprits; some liked the desperado because they were themselves of a lawless breed; and there were others who were profiting directly or indirectly by cattle-stealing. The posses which Pat Garret led forth from Lincoln traveled through a land where every other man was either hostile to the law or afraid to give its officers a word of information.

So May went by, and June; and Billy the Kid was still at large. Men spoke his name in undertones and looked over their shoulders when they uttered it; as for the law, they laughed when it was mentioned. They said there was no law beyond the Pecos.

In the mean time John W. Poe kept on about his business of getting evidence against the Cattle King of Tularosa. If he was disheartened by the turn of events he did not allow it to interfere with his work, and when he came back to White Oaks one day early in July the witnesses were listed; the warrants were sworn out; the case was complete down to the last little detail.

He was walking down the mining town's crowded street that afternoon when an old-timer by the name of George Graham, whom he had known back in the buffalo-hunting days at Fort Griffin, fell in beside him—one of those ardent spirits whom whisky and faro have bested in many an encounter but who are always willing to renew the struggle. On this day, however, he was cold sober.

"Come on," he said as quietly as if their last meeting had been yesterday instead of years ago. "I want to talk to you."

He led the way around the corner and out along the side street to the fringes of the town; nor did he stop until they had passed the last cabin and were in the thick brush.

"Now," Graham announced when he had looked about to make certain that no one was near by, "I know your business in this country, and I got something to tell you."

He lowered his voice.

"The other night, not having room money, I was sleeping in Dedrich Brothers' Livery Stable. They used to be in business with the Kid, those fellows, rustling cattle, two years or so ago. Well, I'd made down my bed and was lying there in the hay, when I heard three of 'em talking in the office. The's just a thin board partition and the words come plain where I was rolled up in my blankets. They was speaking about the Kid. He's been near White Oaks twicet lately; sneaked in to see them on some deal or other. And right now he's holed up at Fort Sumner. I thought the information might come in handy."

They parted there in the brush and went back to town by separate ways, and on the next day John W. Poe journeyed to Lincoln.

"I know the man," he said when he had repeated the news to Pat Garret, "and he's straight. If it wasn't for that I wouldn't have come, for it doesn't sound possible."

The sheriff shook his head.

"Not a chance in a thousand," he declared; "but if you say so, I'll go. We'll pick up my deputy, Kip McKinney, over in Roswell."

They rode down from Lincoln to the valley of the Pecos and talked it over with McKinney in the hamlet where Captain J. C. Lea had recently platted the site of the town which has since grown to one of the most prosperous in the Southwest. Like the other two, the deputy was a former Texan. And like them he took small stock in the information. He and Pat Garret had scouted over the country of the upper Pecos more than once that Summer and they had got no trace whatever of their man.

"Never find him there," he asserted. "He's down in Mexico. That's where he is."

So the three set forth with no faith in the tidings which had led them on the errand. But though they thought it was a wild-goose chase they took the precaution of riding out from Roswell in the direction of the county seat. For if that one chance in a thousand should turn out to have fallen in their favor, they did not propose to let their purpose be known in a country where scores of riders were ready to risk their lives to carry warning to the outlaw.

When they had traveled for some miles out into the hills they turned from the Lincoln road and struck off to the northward toward the abandoned military post. They avoided the beaten trails; they made détours past every ranch house and sheep-camp. They rode hard—keeping the news behind them, as the saying of those old days has it.

It was more like the ride of three fugitives fleeing from justice than three of the law's officers.

Night came. They picketed their ponies and rolled up on the bare ground in their saddle blankets. The next day they pressed on, and when darkness fell it found them encamped in the sand-hills six miles or so out of Fort Sumner.

In the morning they held a conference. Pat Garret had courted his wife in the settlement at the abandoned post; and there was not a Mexican in that part of the country but knew him since last Winter, when he and the warriors of the Canadian had captured Billy the Kid a few miles away.

"And me," said Kip McKinney, "why I've been there half a dozen times. If I was to show my nose they'd all know what was up before I'd got off my pony."

So it fell to John W. Poe to ride into town and find out what he could.

"When you get there," Pat Garret told him, "go to Beaver Smith's store. 'Most everybody hangs out there. If you don't find anything you might go on to Rudolph's seven miles out on the Las Vegas road. He's a friend of mine. Good man. I'll give you a note to him.

"If you ain't back here by dusk, why there's a double row of cottonwoods runs out for two miles from the post at the other side of town. We'll ride over and meet you at the far end of it."

When Poe rode up to old Beaver Smith's store that morning there was no one in sight save the grizzled proprietor, who was lounging in the doorway, and a couple of Mexicans who were devoting themselves assiduously to doing nothing at all. By the time he had dismounted and thrown his pony's reins over the hitching-rack three or four white men had appeared from nowhere in particular.

"Howdy," said Beaver Smith; never was greeting more noncommittal; he looked the newcomer over from head to foot and then let his eyes stray down the little street.

There were now half a dozen inhabitants on their way to the store. Fort Sumner was waking up. Beaver Smith's eyes came back to Poe.

"Where you from?" he queried sharply.

"White Oaks," Poe had the answer ready. "Been prospecting. I'm on my way to the Canadian."

He dallied at the door while the town's welcoming delegation strayed up and gathered around him. They were hard citizens; one did not need to look at their revolvers—and every man of them wore a weapon beside his thigh—to realize that. They nodded to him, and when they had appraised him narrowly—

"Which way you coming from?" one demanded.

"White Oaks," he said. "Been prospecting."

"And where you heading fer?" another asked.

He told the story that he had given Beaver Smith.

"How's the mines panning out?" the first questioner cut in.

He gave them the latest news from Baxter Mountain. It seemed to satisfy them.

"Come inside and have something," they bade him.

He stood among them before the little unpainted bar and drank sparingly of the fervent whisky, the while he retailed such tidings from the lower country as were of interest. And when the talk had become a little looser he turned the subject in the direction of his quest.

"Pat Garret was over in White Oaks when I left," he told them, "after the Kid. They say he's been down that way lately."

The talk died at once. He found himself the center of a dumb group. Beaver Smith shuffled back and forth sorting out glasses. There was no other sound. Poe felt their eyes searching him.

"Have another," he said and waited while the tension passed.

More men came in and watched him as they drank. The conversation picked up again. They talked of mines and of the prospects for feed and other kindred subjects. And when something like an hour had gone by he casually mentioned the outlaw's name once more. No one replied. He caught some of them looking sidelong at one another; but most were watching him.

There was no mistaking the suspicion which had come among them. And now he began to feel that there was something in the information which George Graham had given him.

He loafed about the store for another hour or so and when the constraint had lifted he departed for an eating-house, where he got his first real meal since leaving Roswell. Then he swung into the saddle and rode out by the road which led off toward the Canadian.

He traveled for some miles; for he felt reasonably certain that if one of those hard-eyed men with whom he had been drinking at Beaver Smith's that morning discovered him taking a different route from the one which his story had indicated he might become a target for the man whom he was seeking. When he had gone far enough to satisfy the most exacting of spies, he started across country for the Las Vegas road and made his way to the Rudolph place.

It was well along in the afternoon when he dismounted at the ranch house. Rudolph met him at the hitching-rack; he was an elderly man and well to do, one of the few in the country who were above suspicion of alliance with the outlaw. But the memory of the morning's ordeal in Fort Sumner made Poe go slowly now. He sat on the wide porch with his host, and they talked of many things before he mentioned Billy the Kid.

"I've heard," Poe said, "that he's in the country around Fort Sumner."

It was as if he had thrust a revolver muzzle into the man's face. Rudolph turned a shade paler. His eyes became furtive.

"Not a show of it," he declared vehemently. "He ain't here and ain't been here."

Poe showed him Pat Garret's note then and when the other had read it, put his cards on the table.

"Pat Garret's wrong and you're wrong," Rudolph told him. "There's nothing in the story. Nothing!"

The very emphasis which he put upon it made the statement sound the more improbable, and he was in a sweat of fear. Nor did he draw a free breath until his visitor rose to depart. Then his relief was so patent that Poe rode away more convinced than ever that the outlaw was somewhere close by.

IT WAS now evening; too late for him to return to the camping-place. He struck out for the two rows of cottonwood-trees which Pat Garret had mentioned when he left; and as he was coming up over a low sand hill to the west he saw the sheriff and Kip McKinney riding toward him from the east. They met as if it had been timed by clockwork.

Poe recounted the day's events. When he had finished Garret shook his head.

"We're on a cold trail," he said.

But the feeling born of what he had seen and heard in Fort Sumner kept Poe stubborn, and although Kip McKinney like the sheriff argued that there was no use in going farther, he persisted. At last:

"I know a house," Garret said, "where the Kid used to visit. There's a woman lives there he's took a fancy to. If he's in Fort Sumner he'll mighty likely be at that house."

They rode down the old abandoned avenue of cottonwoods and left their horses near the other end. In pre-war days the Government had a Navaho school here, and the Indians had planted a peach orchard. The trio stole on foot through the straggling trees which had survived the years to a spot where they could watch the house.

The moon rose. They waited here for three hours, but no man came. Some time near midnight a Mexican slipped out of the door and passed close by their hiding-place.

"I don't like the way that greaser acted," Pat Garret said. "If he's seen us the whole town will know it inside of half an hour. We better pull out."

But Poe thought of those hard-eyed men looking at him in silence in Beaver Smith's store and of old man Rudolph, sweating with fear, clamoring that the outlaw was not in the country. He sat there thinking for some moments.

"There's Pete Maxwell," he proposed. "Say we go and see him."

Pete Maxwell was the richest man in this end of the Pecos Valley. The son of old Lucien Maxwell, who gained fame in the days of the Santa Fé Trail, he had come down here after the abandonment of the military post, to become known as one of the biggest sheep men in the territory. He and Garret were close friends.

"If the Kid's been around Fort Sumner," Poe persisted, "he'll have heard of it. We may as well cover all the ground as long as we're here."

So as a last resort and more because they did not like to leave without doing everything that could be done, than for any other reason, they went to Pete Maxwell's house.

In the old days of the military post it had been officers' quarters, a large two-story adobe fronting the open space which had once been a parade ground. A paling fence surrounded it. There was a wide veranda on all sides.

It stood silent in the moonlight as the three men slipped up toward it. When they had passed through the gate, Garret pointed to the nearest door.

"That's Pete's room," he told them. "I'll go in and have a talk with him. You fellows wait out here."

After the Mexican fashion the rooms all opened on the veranda. The door to which the sheriff had pointed was the first one, close to the front; it was ajar for the night was warm. Garret entered without knocking; his tall form was swallowed by the inner darkness.

Poe leaned against the paling fence. McKinney dropped on one knee, tucking that foot under him, cowboy fashion, and started to roll a cigaret. Both had laid aside their Winchesters. They felt able to relax a vigilance which had kept their hands on their weapons ever since the beginning of the evening. Pete Maxwell's place was above suspicion.

And because of that fact the man whom they were hunting had chosen Pete Maxwell's place for his refuge during all these weeks while posses had been scouring the country for him.

Now, while the sheriff slipped into the darkened room and the other two took their places by the fence to wait, Billy the Kid lay on his blankets in a little adobe cabin in the rear of the house listening to the Mexican who had passed the trio in the old Navaho peach orchard. Those whispered tidings of strangers in Fort Sumner aroused him from sleep to catlike quickness.

While he harkened he was drawing on his clothes; he buckled his belt, slipped the revolver in its holster, picked up his Winchester and hurried out unshod, to learn more of the strangers. Maxwell could tell him. He came straight to the sheepman's room.

John W. Poe looked up and saw him approaching in the moonlight, a slight figure, bent forward with haste, almost running. He did not dream it was the outlaw, whom he had never seen. One would as soon expect to meet Billy the Kid in Lincoln as in Pete Maxwell's yard.

The shadow of the house fell on the pair beside the fence. Billy the Kid almost stumbled on Kip McKinney, who was just finishing rolling his cigaret, before he saw them. His rifle was in his right hand; he wore his six-shooter—it was a double-action forty-one Colt's—waist high on his left side, a trick of his own and—like the gun—unique among the warriors of the border. The left hand moved. The weapon's muzzle almost touched Poe's belly.

"*Quien es?*" In English it is, "Who are you?"

In after years Poe said that was the quickest draw he ever saw. And the voice was vibrant with suspicion. And still Poe did not dream whose voice it was. The whole thing—from the time when he first caught sight of the coatless, unshod figure until the revolver was confronting him—had lasted perhaps two seconds. Men drew their guns too often in those days for one to attach any suspicion to that action. And this was the one place in Fort Sumner where Sheriff Pat Garret was welcome.

"That's all right now," Poe said quietly. "No one's going to hurt you."

He had a dim idea it might be one of Pete Maxwell's sheep-herders.

And Billy the Kid backed away without

pulling the trigger. In all his career—and especially since the close of the Lincoln County war when he had become an outlaw—he had been overquick with his trigger-finger. Shoot first and ask questions afterward, was the rule in that country, and he had always gone the rule one better.

But tonight he forsook his deadly custom. Probably it was for the same reason as that which kept Poe from suspecting his identity—this was Pete Maxwell's place. He could not well afford to kill a man here until he was sure that his victim was an enemy.

So he backed away and as he retreated across the veranda—

"*Quien es?*" he asked again.

He repeated the question sharply as he entered the room. The last that Poe saw of him was when he stood his rifle on the threshold.

Pat Garret was sitting on Pete Maxwell's bed. The room was black dark. The figure of the outlaw flashed past the pool of moonlight at the door and was swallowed in the gloom. It reached the foot of the bed.

"Pete, who are those fellows?"

As the desperado asked the question Pat Garret's hand dropped to his revolver-butt. He knew the voice. He started to pull the gun, and it stuck. It was—so he told John W. Poe afterward—a long and lonely moment that followed.

Billy the Kid heard the movement and whirled away from the bed toward the room's outer wall.

"*Quien es?*" he demanded.

He had shifted his revolver to his right hand; he had drawn a butcher-knife in his left when Garret's weapon came free, and the sheriff fired twice.

Outside the house Poe and McKinney heard the two shots and the thump of the outlaw's body as it struck the floor. Then there was a groan.

Garret came forth upon the porch.

"That's the Kid," he said quietly, "and I think I got him." Poe was astounded.

"Couldn't be," he cried. "You've got the wrong man, Pat."

Garret shook his head.

"I'd know that voice in a thousand——"

As he was speaking Pete Maxwell burst forth upon them. Poe was throwing down on him with his Winchester when the sheriff struck the weapon's barrel.

"Don't shoot Pete Maxwell," he cried.

They turned to the panic-stricken sheepman. He bowed his head.

"It was the Kid," he told them.

And when he brought a lighted lamp they found the body lying on the floor with the knife and the revolver in the dead hands. Garret's first bullet had found his heart; the second one had struck the wall as he fell.

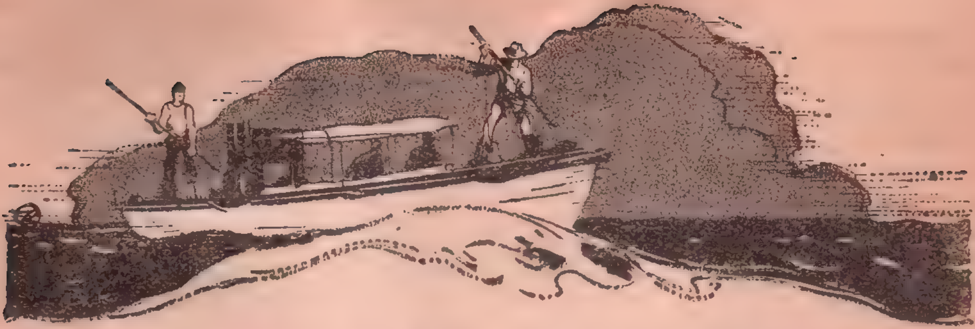
IT WAS nearly a year before they tried the Cattle King of Tularosa. Charley Siringo rode over from the Panhandle and was stricken with smallpox while he was traveling across the country from the Pecos. But men were accustomed to harder things than smallpox in those days, and the wagon boss wrapped his face in a silk handkerchief to keep the spots from showing. Other than that he did not let the disease bother him, and he was on hand to give his evidence when the case was called. So too were the Nesbeths. The jury gave their verdict—guilty.

But the law has its limitations. The judge let Pat Coghlin off with a fine of two hundred and fifty dollars.

For some years to come such men as John W. Poe, Pat Garret and others continued to carry on the task which the warriors of the Canadian had begun. When Garret's term as sheriff ended the people elected Poe to the office. By the time he retired the courts were really beginning to make their presence felt in the land.

So the law came across the river, and only a few gray-haired men who had lived there in the wild days when every one made his own rules of action and enforced them with forty-five or Winchester, remember the old saying of the early eighties—

"There is no law beyond the Pecos."



CATCHING A TATAR

by F. St. Mars

Author of "The Frozen Frontier," "The Gladiators," etc.

THE day that the schooner *Pacific Poll* chose to take the law into her own hands whilst lying at anchor in the middle of Santa Catamaran Bay was long, hot, and windless. The sky was blue above the bay; the sea was blue in the bay. The *Pacific Poll* was blue also, bright blue, and when her captain awoke suddenly from an afternoon siesta, and, glaring overside, discovered to his stupefaction that, with anchor down and no sail, the *Pacific Poll* was undoubtedly under considerable and rapid way, he—why, he looked blue, too.

Now, respectable schooners, fast at anchor, and with their sails all furled, do not go off out to sea suddenly without visible means of propulsion, and without reason given, as a rule.

That is what alarmed the captain as he raced for the bow anchor chains, calling all the still afternoon to witness, with stentorian yells that hastily awoke the crew aboard.

The bow anchor, however, was fast in the sea-bed, or apparently so; the chain was taut and "all correct." Only there was a visible ripple about the chain where it vanished into the water, and the ripple was singing a song all to itself, in the amber and blue afternoon hush, and a high tenor note of lapping waters under the streaked bows was answering it. The ship was going straight and true, by herself!

"We're being towed!" bawled the mate. "The ship's bein' towed by her own blame anchor! D'yer ever see?"

"Is that all?" replied the captain weakly, mopping his head where he leaned against the anchor capstan. "I thought 'twas that new whisky you brought aboard last night. Don't mind me. Go right along. Any other little miracle ye'd like to announce?"

"None," said the mate sarcastically, "unless ye'd care to spend the night at sea, or under it, for there's where we're heading at the rate o' knots, at present. That's all I wish to observe."

But it was not all.

The various craft lying picturesquely about in Santa Catamaran Bay awoke to great surprize at the sight of one fine blue schooner, towed by its own anchor, sliding rapidly past them out to sea.

Pulling on the anchor chain was no good. They tried that, and it only had the effect of increasing the speed of the mad ship.

Men said that by the quiver the chain had the "feel" as of the anchor being alive on the other end of that chain.

"If we go on like this we shall make the doldrums by nightfall," remarked the mate cheerfully.

The skipper's answer was neither cheerful nor common or garden, for the doldrums is a place some eight miles off-shore, where the sea is like smoked glass and all the winds are dead. If a ship, a sailing ship, gets becalmed in the doldrums she may as well send for food and start market-gardening, or hire herself out as a fishing resort. She'll be there some time.

And the mate was right. Straight as the

homing bee heads for the hive that anchor possessed of devils headed for "those darned doldrums," and there in the very middle, just where the air was most utterly still, the sea most glassy, it stopped!

For the first time in his life the captain was dumb. His fist dropped, his eyes bulged, his cap lifted. His lips moved convulsively as if he were trying to speak, but no words came from them, and the mate, the black cook, and all the crew ran to him and peered overside.

It was the loquacious mate who broke the stupefied silence that followed.

"It's coming back!" he yelled. "Heavens above! It's coming back to sleep."

It was. The anchor chain was no longer taut, but was returning to the ship's side, presumably the anchor pulling it.

Next moment every man aboard felt and saw the chain shake, shake as the chain on a dog's collar shakes when its owner gets a wetting and shakes himself dry. Then—then with a groan, with eyes that popped, with pupils that started, they saw!

Deep down through that ineffable blue sea that was as clear as crystal, they saw flying along—there is no other word for it—over the dazzling white of the sandy sea-floor, a gigantic flat fish—not a flat-fish. He was two feet seven inches thick, twenty-one and a half feet in width, including his long side-fins, that were more like great wings, and were themselves five feet and a half long; his mouth was two feet ten inches wide; between the eyes, which were on the top of himself—five feet and a half. He was eleven feet ten inches long, not counting his tail, which was six feet eight inches, and the weight of him was more than one ton seven hundred pounds.

If that is not enough, you have the fact that close to his mouth he had things—"claspers" they call 'em—most suggestive, armlike things, about three feet long, quite evidently put there for the purpose of helping him to feed that demure mouth of his. He was all shining black jet above, and all spotless, dazzling white below, the frontier between the two being lined off as with a ruler.

He flew over those spotless sands, through the blue depths, with a grace incomparable, a superb slow mastery of power that was the very incarnation of the poetry of motion. Something weird there was about him, too, weird, uncanny, and unreal.

No wonder those men of the sea, peering down wide-eyed at him there as he came flying toward them, as if he were some tremendous bat out of a nightmare, sucked in their united breaths and were dumb. They were English. They did not know those waters, and they had no wish to investigate further. One look was enough.

They could believe anything now, even that that fish had run into their anchor-chain in Santa Catamaran Bay, and, finding that something appeared to be wishful of detaining him, had picked it up in his "claspers" and calmly proceeded out to sea, chain, anchor, *Pacific Poll*, and all. Now, he had turned about and shaken the anchor loose, and having, so to speak, cast off his tow, was proceeding, always with the same wonderful grace, back under the ship, to resume his "lawful occasions."

Then the crew of the *Pacific Poll* rubbed their eyes, and, language failing even them, gasped, as well they might, for they had beheld a full-grown, full-blown specimen of the monster manta, the giant ray, the ocean bat, alias devil of the sea—king of all the rays and skates.

Very many and amazing "star" turns had those teeming ocean depths, but none so mysteriously unique as the leviathan manta, the devil of the deep.

* * *

THE dusk came stealing over the sea. Somewhere inshore rose a roar like the pounding of a tremendous storm sea upon a tormented beach. It was no storm, however, as the crew of the *Pacific Poll* thought, but the diabolical in-drive of thousands of salt-water jacks—the crevalle of the natives, a fierce and four-foot fish—forcing before them, in their horrible slaughter-frenzy, hapless shoals of anchovies on to the beach.

The huge manta, as he swept along, rising occasionally to the surface at the end of each beautiful switchback curve of progress, could see them. And presently he was among the outer edge of that maelstrom of carnage, where the big four-footers were charging into the packed mass of anchovies, killing and maiming with such mad fury that they shot far up on to the sands, there to lie and roll, gasping and struggling, in dozens.

Then the manta sank, volplaned down, spread-eagled, sinking gradually, with incomparable grace, like some floating cloud;

there to lie motionless among the coral and seaweeds of every fantastic, brilliant shape and hue till night swept on, and all the sea lighted up, afire with flaming phosphorescence.

The jack drew off with the dark, leaving the shore-line dyed with blood, and presently a host of small, pale, ghostly crawling shapes, each carrying a row of subdued lamps, spread themselves over the spotless white floor of the shallows.

These were crayfish at feed, and for them the monster ray had risked his bulk with scarce enough water under his ponderous white belly.

Nor was he alone. Here, as the darkness deepened, weird forms whirling through the gloom, or leaping with reports like cannon-fire, marked where other rays, the handsome spotted eagle of the seas, were also at feed.

Once the manta himself leaped high, a mighty irruption of fiery cascades, to fall back flat with a crashing reverberation that ran across the deep, and was answered in echoes for miles.

Once, shining dully with a faint and sinister gleam, he all but settled upon, and, for all I know, might have smothered and eaten, an unspeakable twelve-foot octopus, who, however, instantly dyed that wonderful illuminated garden of the seas with a covering cloud of its own "ink," and escaped, with horrible writhings of fear, in the resulting confusion.

Then a strange thing happened. In the gloom an immense black bulk appeared for a moment, turned half over, up-reared like the wing of some stupendous bird, and, still going at high speed, sank again noiselessly, turning magically into a dazzling ghost of white as it did so.

It was followed by another, on the same curving course as the first, breaking the surface and rearing up one tremendous "wing," and sinking again in a glare of white also at the same place.

A third took up the game. A fourth followed. Gleams of phosphorescence showed yet more enormous bulks on the move in the heart of the dim depths—all following one another round and round upon a huge circle, rising at times to cant on their sides at the turn, and sink noiselessly as phantom giant bats from a prehistoric dream-world. It was the fire-dance of a "school" of the sea-devils, the giant rays, a sight few human eyes are privileged to see.

In five minutes our manta, who had lain all this time flat as a rock-slab upon the sands, watching with his cold, glassy eyes, joined in the dance, swinging into place with inimitable grace, and following the next ahead round and round the magic circle, which gradually shifted its center farther and farther out to sea. Times he sprang, as the others sprang, headlong aloft, to come down in a cascade of fire with the biggest things in flops, perhaps, in all nature.

And from the shore, men, staring out, heard the thunder of the leaping manta, and saw the flashes of their fall, like the thunder and the flash of guns, and said that the sea-devils were at their wedding-dance, and made ready.

Dawn found the monumental manta still superbly sweeping round and round with his fellows. At times he showed, as a great "wing" uplifted, heaved over, and dived. At other times he was far down under in the wonderful sapphire hanging gardens of the sea, appearing only as some mountainous bubble shape, flying along always with his wonderful, effortless grace.

And the gasoline launch, stealing behind the first stabbing swords of the rising sun, was unseen by him—unseen by all.

Perhaps it may be that this, the wonderful, the mystic dance of the giant devil-rays, is their marriage festival. Who can tell? Who dare say? Only this I comprehend, that whereas *our* manta, the special giant with whom we are concerned, began that night in "splendid isolation," he did not end it so. Another ray swam close to him, and with him only. And she, be it noted, was—if one may use the expression with regard to wooers a ton and more in weight—an "eligible flapper."

Very nearly, however, she flapped once too often, for, being possibly too much occupied in giving attention to our manta and not keeping her eyes all round her head at once, she so nearly ran into the launch as she rose to the surface at last that it all but tilted over in her stupendous and alarmed wash.

There was, viewed from below, some sudden wild disturbance upon the great golden white circle that represented the surface. Our manta beheld it, knew perhaps its meaning, or some of the same, and acted.

He flew, still wondrous in his grace, his huge "wings" fanning the water into surging eddies, to the spot. He arrived. He was half out of the water with a rush that carried him almost bodily aboard the amazed launch, before he could stop. And he saw, if the glare did not dazzle him, two things at once.

One was the tail of his lady-love, vanishing downward in a smother of foam. The other was a man, erect in the bows of the launch, almost directly above his head, poised, motionless, with right arm upraised, and in his hand a pointed pole with a U-shaped spear-head end—in fact, a harpoon.

That much he saw, but no more.

Then the man struck. His arm flashed out, the harpoon shot forward and down, and the manta nearly hurled the launch into the air, as he sprang at the bite of the iron.

He had been struck by a grain truly, which is a species of harpoon with a heavy detachable head made fast to a rope. He had been struck hard, and the hateful detachable head was fast. The rope, hissing out through the waves, marked the course of the maddened, flying monster.

But if you think that to grain our devil-ray was to catch him, you know not the inimitable manta. This one retired across the hanging gardens, so beauteous, of the sea, and—the launch went with him!

He went, after one more monumental leap, not straight—for that would have taken him from the vicinity of the "school" and his lady-love—but flying along always with that odd suggestion of a flying shadow, towing, at first, the launch behind him. I say "at first" advisedly, because he continued to go about as steadily as a mail-steamer; but it was not, after a time, the launch alone that he towed behind him. Others, launches and boats, joined in the fun—our manta saw no fun in it, however—hooked on astern of the launch, and were towed, too, in a steadily-growing procession, which after some hours numbered no less than twelve craft.

And all the time the white-hot sun slowly marched across the blue sky, and the sea shone like a winking labradorite shield. The man-of-war birds streaked, and the gulls screamed, and far away on in the doldrums the *Pacific Poll*, with all sails spread, but never a ripple under her bows, shone like a gigantic floating pearl. And far away, too from the launches—always where they were not—a triangular back-fin marked the passage of our manta's chosen mate. But though far away, one noticed that, somehow mysteriously, she was always the center (or the "key") to his league-long evolutions.

Then suddenly he stopped. His wings no longer "flew," but remained still, curved gracefully as always, and he floated, volplaned down, down to the crimson, and the blue, and the yellow sponges, the snow-white sand of the sea-floor, and the rocks covered with rainbow-hued shells.

And here, on the bottom, he settled—flat, like some enormous black carpet, only his peculiar whip-tail stuck up, as to its latter half, at an angle. His eyes shone glassy, the sinister eyes of all the sharks—for what is a ray but a flattened shark?—his "claspers" slowly pawing that ineffable blue water, subdued now at that depth, hazy, mysterious, and still.

After that his tormentors might get him up if they could. At the end of half an hour's heated effort they admitted that they could not. Whereupon things languished. The sea-devil had got the laugh of them, it seemed. The position had reached an *impasse*.

Just when things began to look like "freezing up" for good, the sea-devil "exploded all mines in quick succession," so to speak, by himself getting a move on, and coming up to the surface like a whale gone mad.

And then things happened.

The little fleet of launches and boats were not at the moment in towing formation, but all clustered about their leader, the launch to which the manta was attached, and—he came up in the middle of them. He did more. He went up—clean up in the air, many feet, an appalling flying vision!

Then he came down, all two thousand seven hundred pounds of him; but he had no control over his descent. He simply fell.

Those launches and boats parted company as if each had separately discovered the others to be in quarantine for bubonic plague; but it was too late, all the same. The giant of all the rays came down more quickly than they could scatter.

It was the first launch—the launch that had caught him—that received him.

There was one awful smashing impact, a wild and unutterable confusion, a snarling and boiling of waters, a tornado of some most wonderful language, and—no launch!

—unless you counted a crumpled, splintered thing, knocked out of shape and bottom up, which would henceforth not be much good to anybody.

Moreover, there was no devil-ray. He had gone, and the grain, and the rope that held the grain, had gone with him.

Doubtless some observant eye might have seen the end of the latter, still fastened to some match-woodwork, driving away at great speed over the sparkling sea towards that triangular back-fin, that half of an immense, lazy "wing" which from time to time broke the surface with spray a mile away; but they were all too busy rescuing the occupants of the launch to take notice.

One was past rescue in this world. The giant ray had fallen upon him. Another had an arm broken, and the sea nearly did for the rest.

A mile away the trailing wood stopped, swerved, sank, reappeared, and proceeded slowly.

Then—well, then there were two triangular back-fins appearing from time to time, one behind the other, and two immense "wings" heaving out of the deep, as their owners canted at the turn of their upward swimming curve. The devil-ray, the monster bat of the Southern Seas, the manta, had gone back to his mate.

And you think it strange that he should have done so with grain and rope attached? But that is only because you do not realize the leviathan devil-ray, the manta. Doubtless the rope would rot, or get pulled off; and what is a grain, more or less, if not in a vital place, to such a cold-blooded mountain of flesh? Besides, was there not one with him to help him forget?

CROTONS

by

J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Plunder," "Flotsam," etc.

IN THE clear light of broadening day the Kaiwi Channel held a suggestion of terrible solitude. The ranked waves rose in pyramids that seemed made of liquid bottle-glass, the body color of the deepest blue imaginable, primary, theatrical. The hollows were purple, their ever shifting rims gilt with the reflection of the mounting sun. The crests seemed brittle, the steady trade snapped their ridges into crisp spray that shone iridescently, like powdered glass. Perpetually the waves lifted and formed and dissolved to rise again in everlasting echelon, racing on through the channel with a slight hissing of aeration, spurred by the wind.

Above, the heavens arched in a magic dome of crystal. At the zenith the color matched the waves, fading down through

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"Crotons," copyright, 1922, by J. Allan Dunn.

clear olive to exquisite jade-green, yellowing as it approached the horizon. To the north and east, based on the sea line, rose pearly masses of cloud on which the sun shone with a dazzling brilliance, out of which blew the breeze.

Two frigate birds, eagle-beaked, with long narrow wings and forked tails, planed on unbending pinions, rising and falling at will like fish in their own element. Dolphins rolled over and over, tirelessly gorging; schools of flying fish shot into the air, mailed in glittering blue and silver, their vibrating pectorals widely extended, soaring in desperate effort to escape the open maws that rushed relentlessly below them.

In the west, Koko Head, on Oahu, lifted its red mass, glowing blood red in vindication of its name. In the east the sun had risen above the crater of Haleakala, largest of all extinct caldera, deep-pitting the great dome ten thousand feet above the sea that laced the shores of Maui. Molokai showed like a basking dragon, Lanai like a mammoth turtle. The sharp ridges of Oahu caught the lifting light in slopes of slate and sulfur and pink, with gleams of green forest and amethyst-veiled ravines.

Land, sea, bird and fish, the solitude of undisturbed Nature. No sign of man, no fleck of sail, no plume of smoke. Yet the frigate birds, breasting the stream of the gale, remained ever above an object midway in the channel that, between Koko Head and Laau Point, westernmost cape of Molokai, the leper-haunted, is twenty-eight miles wide. It was an eighteen-foot whaleboat, held in some mysterious offshore current born of uneven bottoms, of prodigious sea gorges between submarine cliffs and mountain bases.

In the grip of this stream the boat maintained a sluggish progress against the trade wind. Its white paint was blistered and peeling from the planks, slime and weeds showed thickly as it rolled lazily to the buoyant waves that spurned it scornfully. A spar, mounted forward, bare of boom or block or canvas, lolled on slack stays. Stale water sloshed about the bottom boards.

A brown, withered arm and clutching hand showed above the freeboard, jerking to the pitch and toss of the boat. This belonged to a dead and frightful Melanesian whose long empty belly had bloated hideously and whose filed teeth, stained with betel and tobacco, grinned between drawn-back, shriveled lips. The body, stark naked, sprawled in the bows on its back. Another, face downward, was amidships, jack-knived across a thwart, a dingy cloth, about the loins, fluttering in the breeze. There were four oars close to these two, there was another at the stern, dragging idle in the sea, secured by marlin to the stem of the steering rowlock.

There a man sat hunched, half-clad in dirty white drill trousers and cotton singlet. His head drooped low on his chest, his black tangle of beard fanned over his knees, riffled in the wind. His feet were bare and puffed and broken as were his wrists and hands. The skin had burned as dark as that of the natives. Hatless, his untrimmed hair was backblown in long wisps that revealed the features of a tortured face that looked like nothing so much as the head of a rapacious bird, dead and dessicating.

In the boat was no semblance of food or water. A rusted lard-can seemed to have been used as bailer. The headstaves of a small keg were gaping. To port and starboard, equidistant, four fathoms astern, the triangular dorsals of two sharks moved in unvarying position, sea-jackals, waiting for sea or wind to fling them their fill. Above, the beady eyes of the frigate birds gazed down. A little while ago they had seen signs of life in the figure in the stern. He was still a man, not a corpse. Now—they were not quite sure.

The wasting of the white man's tissues emphasized the bigness of his skeleton. The shoulders were broad, the shoulder-blades projected to throw wide shadows, the hooping ribs proclaimed enormous lung power, and the cordy muscles, unsheathed by flesh, looking like underlays of old rope beneath the skin, told of a once-powerful body.

Oahu shifted in color, discovering form. Maui changed from a great hump of azure to deep-seamed, solid lava, canefields rising on its scoriaceous sides like an emerald tide. Molokai disclosed sheer cliffs with the unreefed sea chafing in white floss of foam at their buttresses. The boat sloshed on with the gait of a hopeless sea-tramp, the crisp waves *slap-slapping* at it, contemptuously testing every seam, tilting it experimentally in the shuttle of the current that bucked the wind.

The sharp fins moved up closer. An upper tail lobe showed for an instant in a swirl of foam as the brute to port made a swift dash. There was the gleam of a gray-white belly as it turned and crunched viciously at the steering oar, shearing off the blade, rocking the boat, sending the steersman's head nodding. The birds, dropping down, wheeled on banked wings, spiraling on the windlane—upward. They were not yet satisfied.

The inter-island steamer *Moi Wahine* came out from behind Laau Point, on her course from Lahaina to Honolulu, rolling in the ground swell, wallowing abjectly as she struck the open channel. She was due at Honolulu at seven o'clock and she was an hour and a half late. The mate was on the bridge, a half-white, keen and quick of eye, a true Viking of the south, a born sailor. His sight was as good as that of his white skipper plus binoculars.

He saw the open boat a mile away, a dead spot amid the continuous flash and run of the sea. It lay on the steamer's course. Had it not done so it is doubtful if the mate would have made a shift, because the *Moi Wahine* was late, because he feared the wrath of Captain Roberts and because he did not at first see anything of the bodies. As things were, he hesitated to awaken the captain, as he must do if he was to take more than passing toll of the derelict. On such slight threads do the pregnant affairs of life and death often seem to be suspended.

Captain Roberts came to the bridge ill tempered, authoritative.

"What's the *pilikia?* Waking a man out of his sleep! What the ——'s the matter with you, Cummings?"

The mate pointed, and the captain rubbed his slumber-heavy eyes.

"A boat? Where? Hmph! Get me my glass."

He made long inspection, forehead corrugating, a deep crease between his eyebrows.

"Three men," he reported. "Two of 'em natives. All dead. Boat ain't worth picking up. Hmph!"

"The cable supply boat from Midway sighted a wreck on Two Brothers Reef last week. No one aboard. Breaking up. Maybe——"

"'Maybe' don't pay for time or fuel, Cummings. We're late two trips running and —— to pay for it, with the opposition line knocking us every chance."

"We'll almost run her down, skipper. It'll make a good story."

"Hmph!"

The skipper was not above notoriety. It helped to make a captain popular. And here was an excellent excuse for lateness.

Captain Roberts of Inter-Island Steamer *Moi Wahine* Picks up Boat and Shipwrecked Mariners in Kaiwi Channel.

He could see the headlines, taste the importance. Dead or alive, the rescued would furnish good copy for the reporters. If dead, he'd tow the boat. Alive, he'd succor them, give them first aid, become a hero of the first order.

Saved from the Sea by Sharp-Eyed Skipper!

It had an alliterative unction, that.

He rang to half-speed, to slow, to stop. He rapped out an order and the bronzed crew, agile with a dexterity unknown to steamer hands of northern latitudes, used to perilous landings as everyday events, swarmed into a boat and gripped their long oars as the falls ran out and were cast off. The *Moi Wahine*, rolling to the rail in the trough, smacked her remaining lifeboats on the wave-tops and the uneasy passengers tossed and groaned in their coffin-like bunks, unmindful of the revelation of tragedy other than their own.

"Eyah! This *haole* alive!" sang out a sailor as he peered into the face of the bearded man while his mates held on to the gunwale. "Two *kanaka make loa.*" Fifteen minutes later the whaleboat towed astern with the two corpses, the white man was in the purser's berth with that sagacious functionary bending over him, striving to force an illegal stimulant between the clamped teeth. The sharks had disappeared, the frigate-birds flown off with a petulant cry.

On the table in the cabin of Captain Roberts there lay a long-bladed knife, more weapon than tool. It had been found between the survivor's feet.

"If that's rust," he said to himself and under his breath, "leastwise, if that's water rust, I've never stuck a pig!"

THE superintendent of the Sailors' Home stood by the window of his office, looking out over the roofs of the Old Fishmarket to where the Japanese *sampans*, Eastern-hulled but Western-rigged, were making for the beach with their canvas furled and gasketed; sturdy sons of

Nippon, black pompadours and coppery skins distinct in contrast with their cotton sleeveless undershirt and short drawers, working the heavy, bulbous steering sweeps with the regular swings of pendulums; strong armed and big calved, with naked feet clamped to the thwarts.

He was an efficient executive, but he was going to be glad to get rid of the outgoing inmate he was expecting to enter the office. He ceased tapping on the glass, watching the *sampans*, and glanced again over his official docket in the case of James Watson, master and owner of the trading-barkentine *Arabella*, bound from Levuka, Fiji, to San Francisco; wrecked and abandoned a total loss on Two Brothers Reef; Watson the sole survivor after an open-boat voyage of nineteen days, two dead Marshall Islanders being the other occupants of the whaleboat taken in tow by Captain Roberts of the inter-island steamer *Moi Wahine*.

There were dates of entry and dismissal, medical report, inventory of the skipper's scant effects, a note that Captain James Watson claimed to be an American citizen, born in San Francisco in the year eighteen-hundred and sixty-seven, newspaper clippings that included the coroner's verdict and the story given out by Captain Watson as soon as he was able to endure an interview. These comprised the written and printed record but there were mental annotations in the mind of the superintendent and they troubled him.

Two Brothers Reef, he knew, lay some seven-hundred miles in direct line from where the boat was picked up in mid-channel, northwest from Honolulu, one of the string of islets, shoals and reefs that, following roughly the same trend as the Hawaiian group, scatter from Bird Island to Midway, where the cable angles between Honolulu and Guam.

He read over Watson's story; brief, descriptive, to the point—if it told all the truth. A faulty compass and chronometer, an error in dead reckoning, dirty weather that hid sight of sun or star for a week. Such the reasons for disaster, the piling up of the barkentine, the ripping-off of her bottom on the jagged dead coral in a frenzy of squall. Two boats launched—one lost in the mad smother immediately—a snarled fall to his own boat in the headlong confusion, provisions pitching out with the ship's papers, the skipper's strong box containing a small fortune in pearls, the boat's compass and the *Arabella's* log.

There were six Marshall Islanders in the crew of the barkentine, a white mate, a half-white quartermaster and acting mate, a white supercargo, a cook who was *hapa-pake*, half-brown, half-yellow, Tahitian Chinese. The mate, the quartermaster and three of the kanakas in the lost boat. With the captain, the supercargo and the cook besides the rest of the kanakas, six all told. Three accounted for. What of the others?

There was the knife with its coated stain—and the hint of Roberts of the *Moi Wahine* to back certain sea-purged blotches on the bottom boards. He knew what they must have suffered on that sea-trek of seven-hundred miles—nearer a thousand for them. One small keg of water and some broken biscuit infested with copra bugs—enough for five a day per man for six days. Nineteen days of exposure, blown north, blown south, the sail claimed in a squall and paid for in rain, then long laboring at the oars to make easting with hands split with sores, with weakening muscles.

On what did they live so long that the skipper, two weeks after the last of the biscuit, retained sufficient spark of life to be fanned back to full flame?

"We killed a shark," said Watson. "Two of them trailed us from the first. I lashed my sheathknife to an oar and lanced it. We had to throw over most of the meat after three days because it was putrid.

But the mate of the *Moi Wahine* had seen *two* sharks trailing the boat. The lashing had vanished, the marlin on the rowlock was insufficient for such a purpose. That the Marshall Islanders would have no scruples in eating the "long pig that walks" was a foregone conclusion. Did the cook or the quartermaster die of exhaustion or were they butchered? Watson, the strongest and the sole survivor, the only witness, what part did he play in this?

"The cook, Li Yuen," the captain had told the reporters, "drank salt water and went mad. He jumped overboard in the night and the other shark got him. A spar had cracked the quartermaster's skull when we struck. The sun grilled his brains, I reckon. He died with his last share of biscuit beside him, sixth day after leavin' the reef. The kanakas just quit, the way they will; died out like ashes."

A likely story enough, but——

The superintendent had known all sorts and conditions of seamen at their worst, but he felt for Captain Watson a repulsion that he could not set aside. If ever a man might be pirate—murderer—so, he fancied, was this wasted giant, now well recovered, cursing through delirium and convalescence alike with a hellish and rotten imagination, roaring bawdy songs or acting with such sullen malevolence that the rest shunned him as they would a suppurating leper. It was true that, in his fever-madness, he had disclosed nothing of any hideous rites. Concerning the boat voyage he had said nothing while subconscious. It had been as if he had locked that strong box of his memory with the key of his will before the will failed him.

It was the eyes of the man that were the worst thing about him, the superintendent fancied. At times they looked like small windows of black glass through which one gazed at a void. Sometimes a murky flame seemed leaping in that space back of the pupils. Once he had seen something there as if a devil, lizard-quick, had suddenly peered through each orb. The official was neither a deeply religious man nor a superstitious one, but he told himself that here, if ever, was a man possessed of a devil, a man whose lusts had never been bridled, who reveled in wickedness; less man than monster. If ever eyes deserved the title, his eye were *evil eyes*. They inevitably affected the superintendent with a fluttering nausea, a lurking horror and a fear.

The door opened, and Watson entered. The superintendent nodded and took seat at his desk, shuffling his papers. Finally he took the knife from a drawer and laid it on top of them. For the first time he glanced at the captain. Watson's eyes, inscrutable as agate, momentarily viewed the weapon, swept on across the superintendent's features to a framed motto on the wall. His beard was swart from collar line to cheekbone. Through the thick bush of it the other thought he detected a twitch of lip, a supercilious, insolent grin. The targeted motto read—

Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

There are certain subtle, infrequent coordinations of the senses that bring about swift, unusual emotions, ancient warnings, that too much civilization has dulled, an irresistible attraction or revulsion that prickles the scalp, lifts the skin in goose-flesh and raises ghost hairs down the human spine. Watson seemed to yield an emanation as distinct as the draft of air from oven or ice-box, as unpleasant as the noxious exhalations of a marsh. The superintendent was keen to be rid of him.

"You are well enough to leave."

This was statement rather than query.

"Aye, and glad to. I'm sick of butterin' bread to psalm tunes. And rotten butter, at that."

"Others enjoy both. You hold a master's ticket?"

"I was master and owner. Yon's my knife. The rust has fair ruined it."

'We thought you might prefer to—clean it yourself."

"Where's my boat?" demanded Watson as he slid the knife into the waistband of the slop-serge trousers provided by the Home.

"I imagine you'll have to see the Collector of the Port. I believe the steamship company has it."

"With a lien on it."

"I know nothing about that. There is a berth open for you if you want to take it and berths are not over plentiful just now, Captain Watson. The *Rhoderick Dhu*, loading with sugar at Ewa for San Francisco, needs a second mate. I understand you were bound for San Francisco."

Watson fouled the air with his oath.

"Me—third fiddle on a sugar-hooker? Me? I had twenty thousand in pearls and shell on the *Arabella*. I was for the Coast and a touch of life. Through with rancid copra and turtle, through with rottin' out shell and dryin' trepang. Twenty thousand! Gone—like that!"

He snapped fingers on both hands, like pistol shots.

"But I'm takin' no middle watches on a stinkin' reekin' sugar tub. To —— with it!"

"As you like."

"Come, this is supposed to be a charitable institution, ain't it? Supported by voluntary contributions for the relief of shipwrecked sailors. Do you send a man out lacking a couple of dollars to chink together? You've got a scale, ain't you? What's the stake for a skipper that's lost everything? You can afford to be liberal. It ain't your money."

There was no cadging whine to Watson, the words were scored with mockery yet meant literally. There was no warmth to the superintendent's reply.

"You have your boat."

"With salvage on it."

"I think not, under the circumstances."

"It wouldn't fetch ten dollars. Come, are you tryin' to save money against a raise for yourself? What are the rules?"

"There are some funds that may be used as you suggest. I don't know——"

"You don't know—what?"

The captain leaned forward, his splay hands open on the oak of the desk. The leaping devils were peering through murky flame back of the black pupils. Irresistible fear swept the other as the wind stirs an aerial harp. The thought of the knife forced itself. He held his voice tremorless with an effort. Normally he was far from a coward. But he changed the ending of his split sentence.

"I don't know that there are exact sums specified for degrees of rank. I could give you twenty dollars."

"You could? Then give it me and be done with this —— rigmarole! Twenty dollars! I've chucked that much to a diving boy at Apia, and bought many a kiss at double the rate."

"From Mr. Coyle's special fund."

"Coyle? Did you say Coyle? What Coyle?"

It was a command, imperative, threatening. The finger-tips of Watson's right hand tamped into the palm with a thud as he balled his great fist.

"*What Coyle?*"

"Amos Coyle, Founder of the Home."

The superintendent nodded to indicate the framed picture on the wall back of the captain. The latter whirled, lithe as a lightweight pugilist upon the balls of his feet. He seemed to expect to confront a man instead of a portrait, hung above a brief setting-forth of the endowment and the intent of the institution. Thrusting his fists into the pockets of his too small coat, Watson stood inspecting it. It seemed to the other that his wide shoulders shook as if with laughter, straining the seams and wrinkling the shoddy cloth. But when he turned back to the desk he showed no emotion. His eyes were black glass again, backed by void.

"Was he ever a sailor?" he asked quietly enough.

"I cannot say. Not that I know of. Mr. Coyle came here before I did. He has been a plantation factor for many years."

"Ah! Regular pillar of the church, I suppose? Sings hymns? Boss of the Sunday school? Passes the plate in church? Worth a heap of money?"

The superintendent ignored the sardonic quality of the remarks. He had heard their like before but never sounded so deeply.

"Mr. Coyle is an influential and highly respected citizen. To him you are indebted for your stay here, your medical treatment, your clothes——"

"These slops?"

"And the twenty dollars. I shall require a receipt."

"To —— with your twenty dollars and your second mate's berth! To —— with the whole canting crew of you! As for him——"

He checked himself abruptly. His eyes became slits, his mouth opened in the black bush of his beard. The superintendent had a fleeting impression of the tip of a red tongue protruding between yellow teeth, a mask of satanic merriment. Then Watson was gone. He watched him from the window, going swiftly down the steps, striding purposefully toward Fort Street. His chin was up, the black beard thrust forward. Indubitably he was laughing.

TIME was when many of the houses of Honolulu's successful ones—merchant, planter, banker, factor—were set back from Nuuanu Avenue on the road to the Pali, with lawns in front where driveways ran under stately royal palms entwined with broad-leaved vines. In front there was hibiscus for hedging or perhaps a stonewall covered with night-blooming cereus. Beds of gorgeous laurel-leaved crotons, variegated from yellow and green to deepest crimson. Cannas and frangipanni, ylang-ylang, riot of jasmine, bougainvillea and huapala vines, silver, golden, purple. Scarlet of poinsettia and stately poinciana, fan palms, travelers' palms, papaia and bananas. Mango, avocado, tamarind, date and fig. Vi and star and custard apple, oranges and shaddocks. Aladdin's Gardens where the fruit hung like jewels and the perfume of the flowers was borne far out to sea by the trade-wind sweeping through the Pali gap.

Then came the territorial annexation. The royal standard, hard beset by sporadic revolutionists, came down and, in the place of the blended crosses copied from the British Jack, there floated the Stars and Stripes. Then came many things, electric street cars instead of mule power, asphalted streets, a fire and police alarm system, a native legislature and a governor, country clubs and golf courses, trotting races to supplant the old events, with island-bred, island-owned and native-ridden horses; polo, the horrible exploitation of the *ukulele* and so-called Hawaiian music and dance, moving pictures and a Chamber of Commerce with a big publicity and tourist committee. Came real-estate experts opening new tracts and architects introducing stucco to replace wood—stucco or shingles—bungalows and Italian renaissance instead of the wide-*lanai'd*, French-windowed, high-ceiled designs that had come about naturally, with their hints of Mid-Victorian building plans imported from New England with the second missionary generation. There was exodus to Pacific Heights, to Manoa Valley, up the slopes of Tantalus above the mosquito belt to a cooler climate where Neapolitan violets bloom and ferns flourish.

There are a few of these old residences left, even lived in by the original owners. One of the latter was Amos Coyle. His house was well above the cemetery, high enough to overlook the town, the harbor and the sea beyond the reef, to view Diamond Head to the east, beyond the rice-fields, the Waiananae range to the west, beyond Pearl Harbor, back of it the Pali where the fresh winds blow always through the gap, winds that once carried the dying groans of warriors dying after Kamehameha's triumphing charge to the verge of the precipice and—for the conquered—beyond.

It was a rambling, comfortable, big-roomed place, a hundred and fifty feet from the road, screened and sheltered on all sides, in grounds befitting its quality. There lived Amos and his daughter Avis, nineteen, only child, who had cost her mother's life and who was winsome enough to have turned her father's grief into a tender memory. Lao Chu was the major-domo of the establishment.

He had entered Honolulu with his master when the latter came up from the South with the proceeds of a profitable sale of pearls at the great mart in Tahiti. Lao Chu ruled the Coyle *ménage* with wisdom, justice and precision, over Chinese house-boys and yard-boys, over the Japanese maids who flitted about their duties, like demure butterflies in their kimonos. And Avis Coyle ruled Lao Chu.

In his eyes she was the personification of grace and truth, beauty and virtue and all goodness—"a plum tree in the spring giving great promise of fair and abundant fruit." Next to his gilded joss, symbol of ancient philosophies, Lao Chu worshiped the golden girl whose hair was woven sunshine and whose eyes matched the color of the deep seas, whose laugh was like the chime of wind-bells, whose nature was incomparable.

Whatever Coyle might have been before he arrived at the island capital—and there were many who remembered him rough of speech and manner—he had prospered and mellowed in the process. His profits had been honorable; he had made good friends and kept them. He was all that Watson had ironically suggested, a church member who practised on Monday what was preached on Sunday and who had not made his money through native mortgages but through shrewdness joined to scrupulous honesty. A just man, a charitable, upright citizen.

Avis was away, at Kailua, across the eastern promontory of Oahu. On her return she was to be married to young Walsingham, son of Hawaii's railroad magnate, a fine match for Avis Coyle, as society saw it, a magical mating for George Walsingham, as he and a string of disappointed, outdistanced suitors saw it. It was a maidenly retreat before surrender, this trip to Kailua; even George was only occasionally allowed to sail around in his power yacht or roll across in his high-powered car.

In her absence the sun ceased to shine for Coyle—now retired from active business with more time on his hands than he knew well how to handle for content. As for Lao Chu——

"I think flower no glow while you stop along Kailua, missy," he had said, and Amos had indorsed him.

Avis laughed.

"Just the same, Lao, don't you forget to have those crotons shifted by the time I get back. Make them the central bed of the back driveway. They are magnificent but they are too gloomy for the front, now that the trees have grown so overhead. They are almost funereal. You don't mind, Daddy-Captain? We'll have a pool in their place, with a fountain, when I get back."

Coyle and Lao Chu surveyed the shrubbery with its varnished leaves of deep crimson, veined in black. Under their shade the mynahs hid their stealings. Lao nodded his wise old head, bald and parchment skinned, his slant eyes beaming.

"I make you plomise, missy. I fix time you come back. Then maybe you come stop along this place afteh you mally, lele while maybe?"

"Of course. I've promised, haven't I, Daddy-Captain? Two whole months of every year, with surprize visits to see that Lao Chu keeps up to the mark. You know what I mean, Lao."

She shook an unnecessary finger at him. It was a habit of Lao, with Avis away, to wait alone upon his master, to prepare his meals, to keep the servants in subjection, remote from library and dining-room, from the south *lanai* that overlooked the sea. The rest of the house was unused when the "plum-blossom" was absent, but it was kept in order. The mock severity of Avis was a pleasant fiction, a joke retained from childhood.

The new bed was laid out at the rear, the crotons were ready for transplanting under the direction of Lao, master of cuisine, of service, of decoration, of horticulture, of many crafts that he had long foregone to practise. Ten years older than the man he served—and Coyle was nearing sixty—Lao stood bland, efficient, listening respectfully.

"McGregor says—" McGregor was the head-gardener of the great Emerson estate established by the banker prince at Waimanu—"they should have the roots dipped in liquid mud and be kept moist and cool. The best time to transplant is after sunset or before sunrise."

Lao nodded and contrived indescribably to suggest his opinion of the imported marvel. Coyle chuckled.

"You don't think much of the Scotchman, eh, Lao? I told him I knew you'd handle the job without any trouble. It was Emerson that mentioned it. Avis had been telling him of her plans."

He chuckled again and broke off, his body suddenly rigid at a boisterous hail that brought with it instant, vivid—far too vivid—memories, long since buried, now hideously unearthed. Lao Chu's hooded eyelids slid back, forth and down, hiding a swift gleam in his sloe-like eyes, his face seemed suddenly to lapse into a deeper inscrutability, as hot wax smooths.

Captain Watson of the *Arabella*, in swaggering, drunken attitude, stood on the garden path, hands on his hips, his shoulders shaking with mirth, the tip of his red tongue showing. Back of him was an impotent, indignant Chinese yard-boy.

"Startled you, did I, Amos, my hearty? And blast my eyes if it isn't Chu! Old Chu-Chu of the *Good Start*, the best cook that ever lit a galley fire. Double luck! Blast me, Amos, but this is a —— of a way to greet an old friend! Old birds of a feather, jolly blackbirds, *met again to part no more.*"

He trolled out the last words in raucous baritone. Coyle wiped away the sweat that had started on his forehead.

"Black Watson! For God's sake, Jim, come in the house."

"That's better, Amos. That's the kind of welcome I've been lookin' for'ard to. Chu-Chu, bring us somethin' to pledge old days. Bring a glass for yourself. Blast me, I'm not fussy. It ain't the first time we've all swigged from the same pannikin. *Wiki-wiki*, my lad!"

He stamped up the steps of the south *lanai* beside his involuntary host and slumped into a wicker chair that creaked under his weight.

"Inside, Jim."

Coyle spoke like a man spent with running. His throat was dry, his nerves twitching.

"It's—it's cooler in the house. But there's nothing to drink, Jim. I—don't use it. Hawaii's dry."

Watson guffawed.

"Don't use it? That's a good un. Amos Coyle, the slickest, slipperiest supercargo in the South Seas, pride of the beach, a —— among the women, don't use liquor! None in the house? Then get it. Chu-Chu can rustle it. Tomorrow you can begin to stock up. If Hawaii's dry we'll moisten it. You'll have a cigar for me, Amos?"

They were in the house now, Watson sprawling on a davenport, feet on one arm. His eyes caught sight of a silver frame on the table back of him and he picked it up, surveying it with increasing interest, emitting a long, low whistle.

"Who's this beauty, Amos? Not your wife?"

"No. She's dead. It's my daughter Avis. She's away."

"And thank God she is, eh, Amos? Well I'll be right here when she comes back. Amos, I'm stripped, cleaned out, but you've got a soft snuggery here. I'll share it. You can stake me when I take a notion to start in again. You've done well. Why shouldn't I follow your example?"

His eyes feasted on the bright young beauty of the photograph. Coyle reached for the frame and Watson relinquished it with a laugh. Chu, entering with a tray and glasses, caught the action.

"Plitty soon I bling *samshu*," he announced. "That kind all I can do, light now."

He left, his back to them, ignoring Watson.

"This is better than your other house, Amos," said Watson, sucking at his cigar after he spat the bitten end on the floor and followed it with the match.

"I don't know what you mean."

"The Home, Amos! The Sailors' Home, where your mug hangs on the wall with the sacred motters. 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me!' You're my rock, Amos, though I'm not goin' to do much hidin' of myself in thee, Amos, unless you make it worth my while! Funny you should have chosen that hymn."

"You were at the Home?"

"Yes, me. You don't bother about the poor shipwrecked sailors you feed, eh, Amos? Never read of Jim Watson of the *Arabella*, wrecked on Two Brothers, nineteen days in an open boat, nigh dead, nigh naked, picked up in the Molokai Channel, living on slops, wearin' slops, and your drivellin' super offerin' me a second mate's berth and twenty dollars out of the Coyle fund for distressed mariners. I nigh burst tryin' not to whoop out laughin' when I twigged your mug, Amos, lookin' so righteous and solemn. It wasn't till I was leavin' I saw it or I'd have sent for you before, you sanctimonious, alms-flingin', hymn-singin', plate-passin' crook! Where in —— is Chu-Chu with that booze?"

Lao entered as if he had been waiting the word. He brought with him a slim brown jug, shaped with a short neck and tiny handle. When he uncorked it the sickly odor of rice wine filled the room.

"Three swigs, Chu Chu. One for you. I know your tricks, you yellow devil. You might slip me a fare-you-well powder. Now then, Amos, down with it! It ain't Sunday; the deacons won't smell it on your breath. Here's to —" he glanced at the silver frame again— "what did you say her name was, Amos?"

"Never mind. If we must talk we'll talk of what we've been together. She is not of that life. You'll understand that, Jim Watson."

There was a pause. Lao Chu sucked in his breath with the slightest of hissings as the two white men eyed each other. Watson covered concession with a laugh.

"Then we'll drink to old times. To the *Good Start* and her cargo. Lord, I wonder what your church pals would think, Amos, if they knew you'd been a black-birder and a shell-swiper? More *samshu*, Chu Chu. You're butler, ain't you, in this grand house? Then see to it there's white man's booze here by supper tonight. And a Number One supper. See to it."

Lao Chu eyed his master impassively. Watson exploded a volley of oaths.

"I kicked you round the deck and overboard once, Chu Chu. Time you spilled the soup on my arm. Remember that?"

"I lemembeh."

"Then look out. And get out. I'm goin' to talk with Amos."

There were wines and whisky served that evening. The blinds were close drawn; the servants kept sequestered. Lao Chu cooked and served. The room was filled with fumes of rank tobacco. Coyle was pale and silent; Watson crimson-faced and loud.

"Old hymn-singer," he rallied. "We'll sing after a bit. You can play on the pianner, Amos. I reckon you ain't got a harmonium. Chu, you keep away from the back of me. I'll feel safer. Amos, remember the time the skipper dressed up in your traderoom muslin and went ashore as the bishop, at Malaita? You with the harmonium on the sand and the crew singin'. We sung 'Rock of Ages,' with the kanakas joinin' in. Sang it in native from the hymn-books the skipper swiped at the mission. Then the skipper led 'em in prayer. All of us, skinful of squareface, down on the grit on our marrerbones! And the skipper asks 'em aboard. There was a man with schemes, eh, Amos? Remember that?"

"Yes. No need to talk about that, Jim."

"I won't but this once, if I'm coaxed pretty. Thirty-four we clapped the hatches on. Worth twelve quid apiece delivered at the plantation. Four-and-thirty blackbirds, baked in a pie. Some oven, down there in the hold of the *Good Start*.

"When the real bishop went ashore, a month later, they clubbed him and *kai-kai'd* him. That 'ud make a fine story for your church friends, eh, Amos? The skipper's dead but 'Pinrail' Sparks is alive. Remember Pinrail, Amos? He was second mate. Used to pack a belayin'-pin in his boot to tickle the crew. He's alive and so is Harry Belcher. I know where to find 'em. Make good witnesses. They've got no character to lose, any more'n I have. No fine house, no lovely daughter——"

Amos had been sitting with his hand over his eyes. Now, as Lao Chu shifted, quiet and swift as a shadow when a blind is raised, Amos Coyle leaped to his feet with face contorted, clutching a carving knife.

Watson rose, kicking back his chair, forcing Chu aside as he dodged it. He jumped back to the wall and whipped a pistol from his pocket.

"No, you don't," he cried. "I sold my boat and got this popper and a few drinks down at the Anchor. That's where I found out where you lived. It's loaded and it'll go off if you don't put down that knife. Chu-Chu, you edge away."

"Curse you, Watson, I'll——"

"No you won't. Put it down. —— it, Amos, the girl's name slipped out. Let harmony prevail. I've got the whip but I ain't goin' to crack it too often. Open up another bottle, Chu-Chu. Harmony, that's the ticket. Close harmony, like we used to. Chu-Chu, you keep out of the singin', you've got no ear for music. Now then, Amos, both together."

He swayed drunkenly, but he was not out of control. As Amos put down the knife Watson began to beat time with the pistol as he sang.

"I know a sweet Samoan girl.
  She lives at Upolu.
And when my schooner makes her port,
  She dons her *holoku*.
Her waist it is so slender,
  Her *opu* so much——"

* * *

THE modernists in science tell us this—and the alienists agree with them—that the study of physiognomy is, as now applied, useless. The face is not an index to the character. The man with the bulldog jaw may lack the courage of a whipped cur, the one with the stupendous brow be deficient in knowledge, while the rat-faced, chinless, weak-eyed mortal may be a very lion in battle, a person of wide understanding. Yet there are sufficient facial and spiritual coincidences to satisfy most of us with the old theories.

The portrait of Amos Coyle at the Sailors' Home was an excellent counterfeit of his physical presentment and it was equally a mirror to his present nature. It was the antithesis of the bullish, bestial features of Captain Watson and showed a man whose features were cleanly cut, whose eyes were wide apart, nose aquiline, forehead high and wide, mouth full without sensuality, a handsome man, a man of force and sterling character. So you would read it. It displayed benevolence, tolerance, humor, frankness, firmness.

To judge by the ancient standards, here was the face of a man either endowed early with all the Christian virtues, tempered in later life by trials, or one who had successfully fought down the whisperings and impulses of evil, conquering the Old Adam in manly fight

Amos Coyle had not been the only adventurous, foot-free youth whose early crops of wild oats have been supplanted by hard wheat, supplying gracious harvests. He had plowed under the weeds and used them for fertilization. He had cultivated the soil until the yield was great and regular. Amos Coyle, the smart and tricky supercargo, strutting along the beaches with a bloom of hybiscus flirtatiously stuck behind one ear; Amos Coyle, black-birder, pearl-shell poacher, consorting with those with whom circumstance had flung him but whom he nevertheless considered of his own choice and kidney; Amos Coyle, to whom irreverence was a sign of smartness, a bid for applause—had died and was born again.

His part in the events that had led to the murder of Bishop Hartwell on the beach at New Georgia had been undertaken as a jest, without foreknowledge that the natives were to be forcibly recruited, without dreaming that the gentle cleric whose mantle they had usurped and smutted would be struck down with a club, a prayer on his lips as his brains were spattered.

When the news reached Coyle he was at Gizo, magisterial and trading-station of the central Solomons. None then knew the rightful cause of the murder, but it was the cause of mourning even among the hardened crowd with which he was drinking. It sobered him to staggering out into the night where the bright moon sought him out with crystal pointers beneath the palms that rustled—murderer! It drove him to a mission meeting where he saw a stronger light, visioning an X-ray of his spotted soul and loathing it.

At first his repentance and its deeds were more of the will than the spirit. In time his acts became the instinctive reactions of a nature remorseful and hopeful. As a pearl broker he prospered. At length he found full faith; he believed that his wealth had been sent him as token of approval; he was positive that God had rewarded him with the woman who became all his life, had chastened him, lest he become vainglorious, taking her from him; leaving a token in Avis as an encouragement to continue in good works.

The muddiest pool may clear if the source is pure. Coyle achieved sincerity and nobility of character. The young Amos was buried and now—now this ghost of the past, rather, this living ghoul, had opened the grave and threatened to display the festering corpse of early sins!

Through the senses all emotions rise. Will controls or permits a loose rein, modifies, guides by the light of reason or by that higher control that is termed psychological, when decision is reached that is not merely for policy but that good may come. The chain from nerve to soul force is continuous. After a week of Watson's enforced, detested presence black murder raged in the convolutions of Coyle's brain. He left his will unsummoned; he refused to listen to the voice of his conscience; he neglected his constant practice of prayer. Against this emotion of hatred fought that of love, aroused by the contemplation of Avis' picture, wrestling it to a deadlock.

For himself he might have fled, started afresh, after buying freedom from Watson at any cost. Such a course meant the wrecking of Avis' happiness. Her mother had known of his misdeeds and soothed the confession with heart balm, with faith in his regeneration, with steady hope and help. Avis was her mother over again. She might go with him, casting love aside in filial renunciation. Such sacrifice he could not accept.

For himself alone he did not care. For her he would have cheerfully flung over hope of heaven and gone down to hell with this devil after he had choked from him life and power of vileness. But—he was tied and delivered; there was no way open. Murder? It would out. His wife would wait for him in vain even if, by some miracle, he avoided discovery. In three days Avis would be returning home to make the final preparations for her wedding, at which Coyle glimpsed the mocking presence of Watson. That was at first. A darker shadow had fallen.

Watson had hinted of settling down in Honolulu. The slimy octopus had dared to think of twining tentacles about the fresh radiance of Avis. Hints only, put when Lao Chu was absent, devilish insinuations and innuendos that left one dread certainty, that, however far he might ultimately dare to go, Watson's resolution was set to break off Avis' engagement. That Coyle should do so, under threat of exposure. Then would come pressure upon the girl to favor her father's old time friend and benefactor.

On his knees by his bed Coyle sank his nails deep into his palms, symbol of the agony of his spirit. His face had become haggard, his hair grayer, the lines about his mouth deeply bitten. He had no sleep. His affairs were neglected. The Japanese maids had been sent on vacation, Lao Chu vouched for the Chinese boys. Yet the house could not hope to hide its secrets.

The purchase of liquor must bring about whisperings, the lights late in the night, the sounds of drunken revelry, must loose rumor and scandal concerning the man who now denied himself to all, pleaded sickness for the dereliction of church duties and then denied himself to all visitors. The Walsinghams had been reserved about the match between their son and Avis Coyle. It had been plain that the parents, of old New England stock, would have preferred the father of their daughter-in-law to be one who could speak more frankly, more proudly of his own connections.

He seemed to have lost the faculty of prayer. He was numb of soul. And he had drunk deeply with Watson; the only way—with a show of aptitude for the captain's pleasures, his reminiscences of the old, wild life—that he had been able to keep the latter within the house. Wine and song were beginning to pall; the lechery of the man's nature demanded satisfaction for all his lusts. He proposed to introduce vicious women into the house.

And all Coyle could say, seeking light, was, "God! God! God!" No more, even in dumb petition.

The next day passed, and the next. Over and over in the back of his mind, as may a malefactor in the death cell, Coyle toiled in the weary treadmill of his fate, seeking an eleventh hour of escape. The new strength within him fought against the old violent impulses. Lao Chu, silent, impassive, automatic, had begun to regard him strangely, he fancied, thinking perhaps that Coyle was backsliding to the old way. Were they ways for which Lao Chu himself secretly pined? The ways of the Oriental were inscrutable, even after all the years.

It was the night before Avis, happy Avis, was to return home. Lao Chu had the bed for the crotons prepared, the plants had been removed, dipped in soft mud, after sunset. They would be in place by sunrise the next morning. Lao Chu would keep his "plomise" though the heavens fell.

Watson had staggered off to bed. "For a beauty sleep," he announced with a leer. Coyle sat at the littered table a gaunt, stony figure of despair, slowly gathering resolution. When Lao came to remove the mess of bottles, glasses, ash, Coyle waved him out, sitting on alone far into the night. He felt God had forsaken him, for he had cursed God in word and deed.

Yet, in his room, he kneeled by the bed, as much from weariness as anything, with one vague, despairing hope that he might yet be shown a way other than the one he had determined upon. But the posture of petition found prayer wanting. Aforetime he had felt ecstasy, the dynamic thrill of connection with the All Powerful Source. Tonight the connection was wanting. He was only an old man, condemned to worse than death, tormented in a living hell.

So Lao Chu found him, bringing him a cooling drink. Coyle took the chilled tumbler gratefully for his throat seemed filled with cinders.

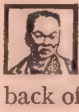
"I clush flesh tamalind, flesh lime. Velly nice." Coyle sipped at it, set it down, clutching at Lao's arm, speaking in a hoarse, strange voice.

"I'm going to kill him, Lao. It's the only way."

"Wha' fo'? No. You Klistian, no can kill. Suppose you kill, you hang. Much betteh he hang. You wait along tomollow. Now you dlink, you lie down, tly to sleep. I put out the light."

"No, for God's sake, *no!* I can't stand the dark."

But he lay down and the old Chinaman who had been cook aboard the *Good Start* soothed him as if he had been a feverish child. When he saw Coyle's body relax and his eyes close he stood at the door before he shut and locked it from the outside, slipping the key into his sleeve, sure that the soporific he had administered would last until the morning.



IN HIS own room Lao Chu looked quietly about him. He went to the window and saw the lights burning back of drawn curtains in the boys' quarters where they were playing fan tan.

There were two shrines in the room. One of his heathen deity, before which he lighted punk sticks. The other a picture of Avis Coyle, exquisitely framed in carved sandalwood, signed "To my friend Lao Chu." Before that stood a tiny oxblood vase of Ming, in it a spray of frangipani, two of the white, velvety blooms sending out fragrance the punks could not dilute.

There was a smile on the yellow face as he looked at the photograph, the same smile with which he had surveyed the sleeping Coyle. It sobered as he turned to the joss, and, kneeling, touched his forehead to the floor in devout obeisance. Perhaps he worshiped. Without doubt he found inspiration. When, after a long interval, he got to his feet his face was placid with content.

He opened a chest of teak, reenforced with metal, cunningly locked. He sought at the bottom of a heap of miscellany and brought out a small lacquered box. In it was a ball of dark brown substance, the size of a large marble, greasy looking, slightly elastic, resembling guttapercha, with an odor of wet and musty cloths. This he rolled out on top of a bureau, examining it with the utmost care. It was the witch-ball of a *tahunga*, a *tindalo* wizard, taken from a deserted hut on Savo Island in the Solomons, after head-hunters had raided it. As Lao cautiously squeezed it a sharp sliver of what looked like bone, a tiny fang, protruded.

Lao Chu descended to the kitchen. In the pantry was a young white cock in a crate, brought in from the yard earlier in the evening. It blinked at the light Lao switched on, then began to peck at its grain. He opened the crate and dexterously seized it by legs and saddle, then tucked it under his arm, stroking the gleaming hackles, parting them. He pressed the warlock's weapon against the flesh. Instantly the cock's neck fell limp, its eyes closed, its beak half opening, remaining in that position. No other change appeared, the scarlet comb retained its color. Watching it carefully, he presently lifted a lid. The eye with its black pupil and reddish brown iris was still bright.

Satisfied, he locked the dead bird away in a cupboard with a key from his executive bunch and went silently up through the house to the door of Watson's room. He knew it to be locked, probably secured in some other manner. He knew the jalousie shutters opening on the upper *lanai* would be fast. He knew that Watson slept with his gun under his mattress, close at hand. A houseboy had seen its imprint. Lao Chu had never entered the room since Watson occupied it but he knew all these things.

Watson tasted nothing that was not first sampled by his involuntary host, he watched his cigars. He was never too drunk for precautions. If he did not intend to injure too soon the goose that laid golden eggs, he took equal care against his own possible injury.

Lao Chu listened to the stertorous snoring within the citadel. Then he began to tap on the door with a peculiar, variant rhythm.

It got through to even Watson's alcohol dulled consciousness after a while. The captain of the *Arabella* had traveled in savage lands in constant danger and his outer sentinels were attuned to react swiftly.

Instantly he was as wide awake as his semi-sobriety permitted. Lao heard the removal of a chair braced under the door handle, then the click of the lock. The door opened swiftly, the room dark. Lao had switched the landing light and he stood in plain view. Watson, clad in his host's pajamas, too small for his chest, unfastened there, showing shags of black hair, thrust his pistol forward. Lao stood unblinking, hands folded in his sleeves.

"What's the matter, you yellow devil?"

"I like speak along of you. Velly special. Velly plivate."

Watson hesitated, frowned, brushed some sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand, found the switch by the door and turned it.

"'Velly plivate,' eh! Well, it's got to be 'velly' interestin' or you'll be velly solly. Come in and shut the door."

He sat on the edge of the bed and Lao stood with bent elbows before him, his hands still tucked into his ample sleeves. The Chinaman came straight to his matter without preamble.

"How much you want suppose you go away? Go tonight. No come back."

Watson looked at him quizzically. He seemed to find a certain humor in the situation.

"You got a stake tucked away, Chu-Chu? And you want to buy me out? Hardly likely, I think. You are talking for Amos? Where is he?"

"Asleep. I give him something make him sleep. How much you want?"

"I don't *sabe* this, Chu-Chu. Are you offerin' me your own cash?"

"*Maskee*. How much?"

Cunning showed in Watson's eyes and the swift lick he gave his lips with his red tongue.

"Lump sum?"

"No. You stop along San Flancisco. I got flend in San Flancisco. He belong Hop Sing along of me. You see him evelly month. He pay you."

Watson drew himself together, reflective, striving for full clarity to consider the proposition.

"No," he said, shaking his head sagely. "It won't do, Chu-Chu. I can get all I could ever get out of Amos by stayin' here. I like it here. I'm goin' to cash in. He wants me out of the way before tomorrow. The girl comes tomorrow. I'm goin' to see if she looks as good as her picture. *Sabe?* If she does——"

He licked his lips again.

"You think you mally her?"

"Maybe I won't—have to—mally—her."

Lao's eyelids slid back into the eye orbits without wrinkling. For a moment he let Watson look fairly into his eyes. Save for their slight slant, there was little difference between them and Watson's. All were black, and behind the black pupils something seemed to leap and peer in murky flame. But Lao's voice was silky.

"I think you go, all same," he said.

"You do?"

Watson's face was beginning to purple

with congested blood manifested in little networks of broken veins.

"You get out of here, Chu-Chu, while you're all in one piece. You tell Amos I'll see him in —— first before I get all that I want. Him livin' like a king for years and me scratchin' for a miserable twenty-thousand—just to lose it."

"You take twenty-thousand? Can do."

"No! I'll see him in —— first."

"Maybe. Maybe, suppose he wantee look-see, he find *you* there."

It seemed to Watson that Lao Chu was deliberately irritating him. He thrust out his under lip and drew down his heavy brows, losing his control.

"So that's it, is it?"

Lifting his pistol he aimed it at Lao's forehead, his finger crooking to the trigger.

"Threaten me, will you?"

"Mo' betteh you no shoot," said Lao composedly.

His hands were out of the sleeves now, hanging loose-fisted at his sides. They displayed no weapon.

"You look outside, you see boy play *fan tan*. You see light in window. Those boy all belong along my *tong*, all belong along Hop Sing Seclet Society. Me, I am Masteh in Hop Sing. Suppose you shoot, suppose you kill, pistol make too much noise. They come. I think you hang."

Watson laid down the pistol. Lao could see him tensing for a spring. There was nothing but brutality in his face, the will to kill.

"Make too much noise, eh? Thanks. Make too much noise, you yellow devil. Well, then."

He launched himself from the bed, his bare toes scuffling the rugs as they aided his leap, his great hands open to clutch Lao's throat. Lao stepped back a little, bracing himself. He could not escape the rush of that human avalanche. It seemed as if he was not trying to avoid it. As Watson's hands cruelly gripped him, compressing his wind-pipe, the long fingers of Lao's right hand, looking as if they were carved from ivory, clung for a brief moment against the skipper's hairy chest. Then they closed, as if spasmodically, squeezing the poison-ball.

Watson never felt the prick. His next heart-beat pumped the venom through his system. Without a shudder he collapsed, Lao Chu straining all his strength to ease the big, inert body to the floor. Then he padded down to the ground floor, went out through the back offices and crossed to where the houseboys gambled.

PERHAPS Lao Chu had not taken into calculation, together with his opiate, the exhausted general condition of Coyle. It was mid-morning before the latter awakened and saw the sunshine sifting in through the slats of his jalousies. He rang instantly for Lao before he saw that the latter was seated at the foot of the bed.

"What time is it? Why didn't you wake me? Don't you know what day this is?"

"I *sabe*. Today missy come back. I fix cloton bed for her."

"Where is Watson?"

He was off the bed, still dressed, save for coat and shoes, fumbling with the latter.

"We've got to get rid of that beast. Avis will be here before noon. Why did you let me sleep, Chu? Now——"

He unlocked and opened a drawer, taking out an automatic, releasing the clip. Lao crossed to him, putting a hand on the gun.

"*Maskee*," he said. "*Maskee*. Watson, he go."

"Go! Where?"

"I not know. But he go long way. No come back."

Coyle dropped the gun and took Lao by both shoulders glaring into his eyes.

"How do you know? Did you see him?"

"I speak with him *lele* while las' night. And he go. I say good-by along of him, long time befo' sunlise."

"Then he's gone to fetch Sparks and Belcher. He threatened to, last night. I—God help me—I tried to bluff him."

Lao cleared his throat contemptuously.

"Huh! Long time I know Spahk and Belcher dead. They dlown. I *sabe* that long time ago along some fliend come from Samoa. Watson he plenty lie. Suppose——"

There was the sound of a motor horn jubilantly pressed. Coyle tilted his blind slats.

"It's Avis. Lao——"

"*Maskee*," Lao Chu answered suavely with the term that in China has so many shades of meaning and application for the English of "it doesn't matter." "I go down. I speak you fix up *lele*. I speak you shave."

Coyle watched him leave with his wild eyes slowly softening to hopefulness, still tinged a little with incredulity. Then, with hands that shook he began to lather and prepare to shave.

"Hello, Lao. Where's my Daddy-Captain? You've moved the crotons. Are they planted yet?"

"All plant. Plant um this mo'ning, befo' sunlise, all same Misteh McGlego' he speak along you' fatheh. You' fatheh he jus' shaving now."

The girl was out of the motor, her stalwart young fiance beside her, both ardently in love, unashamed to walk hand in hand round the house to see the transplanted crotons. Lao Chu followed, beaming. An oval twelve feet by eight was filled with the crimson, black-veined leaves. They were glossy enough but they seemed a little wilted.

"Are you sure they will grow, Lao?"

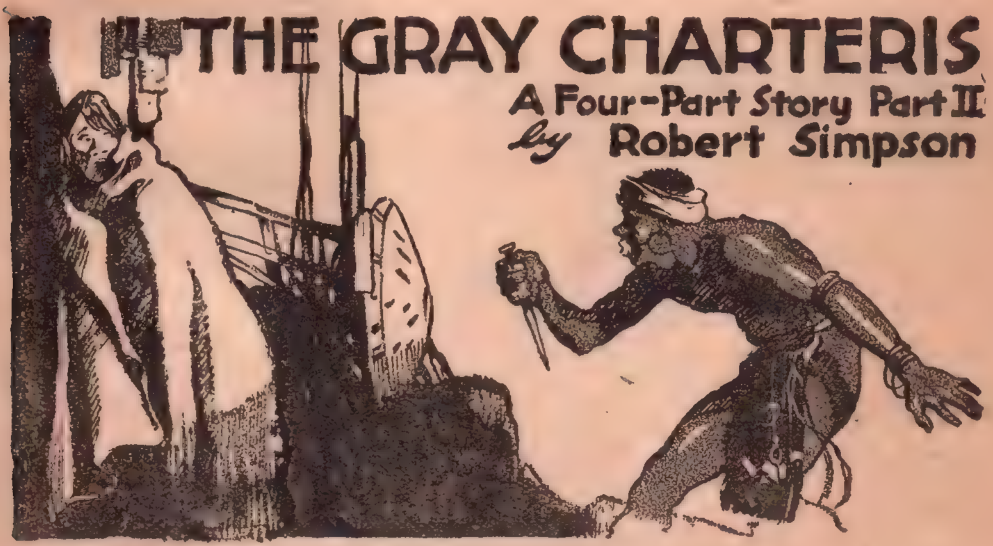
"Quite sure, missy. They all lightee by tonight. I put plenty Numbeh One fehtilizeh along of them. I think your fatheh he come now."

Coyle was coming down the steps of the south *lanai* to the garden. Avis left her lover and ran into his arms.

IN HIS room Lao Chu replaced the frangipani in the Ming vase in front of the picture of Avis Coyle with a spray of *huapala* vine, not unlike honeysuckle but of the deepest gold. The native name means sweetheart and Lao Chu knew Hawaiian well.

He renewed the punk sticks in front of his gilded joss. Then he brought out another bowl, of black porcelain, and set it before the gilded god. In this he also set a spray, not of flowers but of laurel shaped leaves that looked as if they had been newly varnished, leaves of crimson, thickly veined with black, leaves of croton.

There are many strange things placed on the shrines of heathen gods.



THE GRAY CHARTERIS

A Four-Part Story Part II

by Robert Simpson

Author of "The Other Allingham," "Gifford the Gifted," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

ON THE banks of the Benin River in the Niger Delta were sprawled the buildings of Marsden & Co's. trading-factory. Across the way stood the decrepit establishment of the only rival in the vicinity, which belonged to Bart Jardine and his daughter. A distance down-stream rotted what was left of a concern once known as Grandison's, and it was to this latter beach that Charteris, a man with silvery hair and the face of a youth, came, appearing no one knew why or whence.

At the same time Hugh Morrison, owner of Marsden & Co., arrived in his yacht with his daughters and servants to look over his agency and investigate the circumstances surrounding a disturbing quarrel between two important native traders, Agwala and Abado. His visit had not lasted more than a few days when, one pitchy night, as he paced the deck of his boat, Mr. Morrison was done to death by a mysterious assailant, and immediately the neighborhood of whites and blacks was thrown into an

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"The Gray Charteris," copyright, 1922, by Robert Simpson.

uproar. Every effort was made to determine the murderer, and, during the proceedings of inquiry, suspicion fell upon every one from the puzzling stranger, Charteris, to Noni, Margaret Jardine's negro maid, and next Abado—who had incontinently vanished during the confusion. But even Morrison's own daughter, Elsie, was subjected to a grilling, and it was her nervousness and bewilderment that created a new air of suspicion and served to complicate the whole affair all the more.

CHAPTER IX

ABADO DECIDES

THE atmosphere in the library had the temperament of a lucifer match. Even Elsie sensed its crackling consistency the moment she entered the place, and that she was accompanied by Charteris did not serve to relieve the tension.

With a murmured apology, Charteris slipped over Hogmanay's feet and behind Malkett's chair and reached the Great Dane's side before any one quite grasped the fact that he was there.

"Miss Morrison was rather frightened by your official aspect," he said to Parker *sotto voce*. "But I convinced her there was nothing to be afraid of. Mind if I take a back seat?"

"Not at all if you can find one."

The Great Dane's voice had an unaccustomed rasp in it. His patience, apparently, had been severely tried in the past half-hour, and a glimpse of Malkett's glowering countenance and Hogmanay's solemnly dour expression was sufficient to indicate that, under abnormal circumstances, trade and government had been indulging in one of their frequent plainly worded criticisms of each other.

Catherine's cheeks were pale, her eyes hard and her mouth gave the impression that it would be some time before she would smile again. Even when Elsie went over to her, she acknowledged the girl's presence simply by putting a protecting arm about her waist.

Margaret Jardine appeared to be torn between sympathy and something approximating anger or indignation, or both, and Captain Walton, who evidently represented the yacht's share in the responsibility for the crime, stood a little to Margaret's right, leaning a shoulder against the wall and trying to make his little button eyes take on a semblance of austerity.

Arthur Garriman Bark stood facing the commissioner at the back of the "court," and Noni, who squatted on the floor at Margaret's feet, watched him and Charteris alternately out of the corners of her squirrel eyes.

She, alone, of all the little company, appeared to be the least affected by the turn of events. Her little feet were carefully tucked out of sight under her print overcloth, the gaudy silk handkerchief about her head had been arranged just so, and nothing on earth was more guileless than the simplicity of her expression.

Charteris did not find a chair, but stood in the corner near the screen door to the right of Hogmanay, who had risen to offer Elsie his seat. The girl had no opportunity to accept it, because it was then that Parker said as pacifically as he could:

"There is no need to be afraid, Miss Morrison. This isn't a court-room, and I don't want you to feel that you are on the witness stand or anything official of that sort. We are trying to get at the facts of the case as amicably as we can," his smile was somewhat strained, "and I want you to help us as far as lies in your power. Just stay where you are and try to answer the questions I put to you as simply as possible." A pause. "I understand you were playing cards in here with Mr. Dillingworth when it happened?"

"Yes. Over there, where Sandy—Mr. MacGregor is standing."

"How long was it, after your suspicions were aroused, before you went out on deck?"

Elsie hesitated and Catherine's arm tightened about her waist. "I really don't know. Dad's whistling stopped so suddenly it—it frightened me. Tommy—Mr. Dillingworth and I waited to see if it would begin again; perhaps a minute, perhaps only a few seconds. Then I ran out because I couldn't stand it any longer and before I'd got more than a few yards I saw a faint black heap on the deck, and——"

"All right," gently. "Did you hear any other sound after the whistling stopped?"

"No. That was what made it so terrible."

"A splash, perhaps?"

"No. Nothing."

"I see." The Great Dane paused. "Better take a sip of water," he advised, and when Catherine had poured some from the water-cooler on the desk into a glass, the girl drank a little as if she thought she were making a public exhibition of herself. Then Parker asked—

"Did your father ever take you into his confidence in matters of business?"

Elsie looked startled, and Catherine was on the verge of an objection, but apparently thought better of it.

"Why, no!"

"You remember, of course, the visit Chief Agwala paid your father at Forcados? Did you, by any chance, learn anything of what was decided upon on that occasion? No, no, don't be alarmed. That visit of Agwala has important bearing on the cause of your father's death, or, rather, we believe it has, and I simply want to know if you learned anything of the circumstances attending it, from any source whatever. Did you?"

Elsie's bewilderment was altogether convincing. She did not have the faintest suspicion of the provincial commissioner's drift, and her reply in the negative was almost unnecessary.

"Not even from Mr. Dillingworth?"

"No. Nothing at all."

"All right. Thanks. I think that is all."

It was.

EVERY member of the *Bonny's* crew from Captain Walton downward had been questioned by Malkett or Bark, or both, within the past few days, and it had been proved as nearly as it could be proved, under the circumstances, that no one on the yacht had seen Morrison die or had any visible reason for encompassing his death.

Nothing had happened since Malkett had come on board to alter the assumption that the thing had been done from without; on the contrary, evidence had been forthcoming that provided sufficient reason to believe that Morrison had been murdered because of his own conception of ethics in business.

Having questioned Catherine, Tommy Dillingworth and Elsie, the Great Dane was now reasonably convinced that none of them knew anything of what had transpired between the late king of West African trade and Agwala at Forcados. But, because Hogmanay had dourly persisted in concealing his knowledge of it, there had been a war of words, in which the business methods of the deceased had inevitably come in for some uncomplimentary scrutiny and criticism on the part of the government.

This had not pleased Catherine, and she had said so, without troubling to remember that she was talking to the representatives of the law.

Hogmanay, of course, had become only more stubborn than ever, and the fact that Parker had purposely given the Morrison faction an opportunity to be frank with the government, if it had anything to be frank about, before he called upon the ultra-mysterious Noni to say anything at all, was the most irritating circumstance in the whole affair. Parker spoke directly to Catherine and Captain Walton.

"I have no reason to believe that the whole ship's company has not been perfectly honest with us in every detail. My friend MacGregor isn't a member of the ship's company, so we won't hold the character of his information against you."

Captain Walton answered Parker's smile, but Catherine ignored it completely. He went on quite calmly, however.

"If one knows anything of the native mind in its relation to a case of this sort, one knows also that nothing is to be gained by white people mincing matters among themselves." Then, to Margaret Jardine quietly—

"When was it the girl first came to you and said she was afraid of the government?"

Naturally, every eye turned toward Margaret as though Parker had thrown a spotlight upon her, and the scuffling of a Hausa policeman's naked feet on the deck outside was plainly audible in the second or two of silence that waited upon Margaret's answer.

"The evening after Mr. Morrison was killed," she said simply. "When I left here to return to the hulk, she seemed nervous and ill at ease and when I finally asked her what was wrong, she told me the government men had frightened her."

"Did she say why they had frightened her?"

"No. I imagined at the time that, since she had been here with me in the midst of so much excitement, she had just been frightened by the seriousness of everybody and everything, and particularly by the government officials who had, of course, to question everybody on board."

"Did she say that any one had questioned her?"

"Not then. For several days I noticed

that she was acting rather queerly. And then, last night, Mr. Bark came to the hulk, and she ran to me and begged me not to let him take her away."

Bark smirked, but no one paid any attention to him; no one except Charteris, who watched him more closely that he did any of the others, not excluding Noni.

"And then what happened?"

"Mr. Bark explained to me that he had a few questions to ask Noni, and that he had no intention of harming her in any way. I told her not to be silly—she was hiding behind my back at the time—and to answer Mr. Bark's questions if she could.

"He spoke to her in Jakri and I could not understand what was said, but, apparently, he got the answers he wanted, and, when he went away, Noni seemed to have relieved her mind of a considerable weight.

"She would not tell me what Mr. Bark had said to her except that it had something to do with a family palaver, and then, this morning, you sent a messenger asking me to bring her here, and that, I think, is all I know about it."

"Thank you. Have you any reason to believe that the girl's testimony is not to be trusted?"

"Not any less than that of any other native."

"Nor any more?"

"No. She is only a child, but her simplicity is far from being everything it seems to be."

Parker nodded, and Noni, who had not understood a word of what was said about her, made even Catherine relax by choosing that moment to yawn quite audibly. The Great Dane looked toward Bark.

"All right. Go ahead. But don't frighten her."

If the presence of Charteris bothered Bark now, his self-control was highly commendable. Without stirring from his place, he accepted the center of the stage with a slight lift of the shoulders, and spoke to Noni in Jakri gutturals that sounded almost tuneful. The girl looked at him, then at Charteris, grasped Margaret's skirt a moment and rose slowly to her feet.

Bark explained to her in Jakri that he was going to ask her several questions in English and instructed her to answer them in English for the benefit of the commissioners.

The white's of Noni's eyes showed prominently then, but, in a very few seconds, she was nonchalantly leaning most of her weight on the arm of Margaret's chair while the sole of one small naked foot absently scraped the instep of the other.

"You be Abado daughter?"

"Yessah."

"Which man want you for him wife?"

"Plenty man, all time," Noni returned complacently.

"Yes, but—you savez Doridi?"

"Eh-heh! Doridi be big man for Agwala— Doridi beg me be him wife long time."

"What's matter you no' marry Doridi?"

Noni shrugged her shoulders most expressively.

"He no' good for me. My father no' like him all same he be Agwala man. My father no like Agwala."

"Them las' time Doridi look you, he want you be him wife?"

"Eh-heh! Be so he talk all time."

"What other thing he talk them las' time?"

"So-so trade palaver."

"What he say?"

"He say Mas' Morrison go fix Abado proper."

"How Doridi savez dat?"

"He be big man for Agwala. All same Agwala and Mas' Morrison talk for Forcados, little bit pass, Agwala talk for Doridi, softly, softly, all same catchee monkey."

Catherine looked rather bewildered, so Margaret explained whisperingly that Agwala had taken Doridi into his confidence immediately after his talk with Morrison. Bark went right on.

"What thing Doridi tell you Mas' Morrison go do to fix Abado proper?"

"He say Mas' Morrison go pay Abado so-so, little bit price for him oil and kernel, so he no fit to trade for Marsden beach. He say Mas' Morrison go make Abado lose plenty big money, so he be small-boy Sobo again, and no' fit to bodder Agwala no more."

"What's matter Doridi talk so? He no savez you be Abado daughter?"

"He savez. He t'ink so Abado go like him little bit, suppose he tell him what Mas' Morrison go do. He t'ink ~~so~~ I go be him wife one time."

"What you do them time he finish talk?"

"I tell him he be fool," Noni admitted blandly. "So!"

And she snapped her fingers.

Only Elsie laughed, a feeble, nervous sound that threatened to crack.

"What thing Doridi do them time you tell him he be fool?"

"He go 'way."

"Which place he go?"

"He go for market."

"How you savez dat?"

Neither Catherine nor Elsie could follow Noni's reply to this question, and, in truth, the girl's pidgin English was so involved that even the Great Dane had to make her repeat parts of it; but, reduced to its simplest form, the answer contained the several facts that at a near-by native market Noni had passed Doridi's information on to Abado, largely because she was afraid not to, and that she had preceded Doridi to within whispering distance of Abado's ear by something less than an hour.

"Which day all them thing happen?" Bark asked.

"Be eight day pass."

"How you 'member dat?"

"Six day pass me and Missy Cap'n Jardine go for Marsden beach. Be two day pass dat."

Just the faintest hint of color tinged Margaret's cheeks. But it drifted again as Parker turned to her and asked—

"Do you remember, Miss Jardine, if this girl was absent from the hulk for any length of time last Wednesday?"

"Yes. She left in the late afternoon, and returned next day."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite. She told me she wanted to talk to her father about a palaver of some kind. As a rule, she is only too anxious to keep as far away from him as possible."

Parker nodded, thought a moment or two, glanced toward Hogmanay, who was stroking his beard in a sort of relentless reflection, then mumbled something to Malkett who rose and went quickly out, beckoning Bark to follow.

Bark followed, but because Hogmanay's unmoving bulk insisted upon it, he had to pass Charteris at closer range—as would have been obvious to any one on the deck outside—than he cared to.

"I think that's all, ladies and gentlemen," the Great Dane was saying pleasantly enough, as the tips of Bark's fingers touched the screen door. "But if any of you have anything to add that will substantiate the girl's testimony, I'll be glad to hear it."

Nevertheless, Bark heard quite distinctly what Charteris said to him in passing. He hoped no one else did, and the fact that he could not be sure of this, made him feel decidedly uncomfortable all the way to Marsden's beach.

When Malkett and he stood on the top step of Hogmanay's stairs—on the exact spot where Abado had elected to die, if such a thing could be allowed in such a place—Arthur Garriman Bark had a sinking feeling.

"Where 'n —— is he?" Malkett demanded wrathfully.

Arthur did not know, then or later.

Abado's canoes and oil and boys and women still clustered the breakwater. But Abado himself, suspected of planning the murder of Hugh Morrison, had apparently decided to die elsewhere.

CHAPTER X

THE WISDOM OF THE TORTOISE

IN THE cool of the late afternoon, when Charteris paddled leisurely up-river toward Grandison's beach again, the excitement of the morning on board the *Bonny* had died down to a low and spasmodic drone.

Abado had vanished. He could not be found. But, as his guilt had been established beyond peradventure by his sudden disappearance, there was little more to be said or done in the matter until he was safely laid by the heels in the barracks at Warri or Sapeli.

Everybody that mattered knew now why Noni's evidence had been so important. It not only divulged the reason why Abado had instigated the murder of Morrison—and no one, who knew anything about the Sobo, believed that he had actually done it himself—but it also definitely established the most important fact that Abado had known of Morrison's intentions in relation to himself in plenty of time to give him the opportunity to strike in his own defense.

Not even Hogmanay doubted the damning quality of Noni's story after the full weight of that final truth had descended upon him. None knew better than he that the deed was worthy of the Sobo; that it was typical of Abado to go straight to the root of trouble and destroy it at its source.

Hogmanay, however, persistently refused to commit himself, cannily evading the issue by saying that he would wait for advice from the Liverpool office. But even Catherine, who occupied a deck chair a foot away from the Great Dane, as Charteris crept up-river in the shade of the overhanging bush, was reconciled to the belief that if justice were to be done, it would be impossible to be too squeamish about revealing the motive for the crime.

It was not an easy pill to swallow. But Catherine, who knew how to smile when she lost by a six-inch putt on the last green, knew also how not to swallow bad medicine in the presence of the multitude.

She was, in fact, in a rather apologetic frame of mind because of her open antagonism of the morning; and since the Great Dane was under the impression that he had been perhaps just a little too official and too impatient with her point of view, under the circumstances, they both watched the departure of Charteris upon an equal mental plane.

"He's terribly odd," Catherine remarked, "or oddly terrible. I'm not sure which."

"Yes. But I believe he is really an awfully good sort."

"Why! Do you know him?"

"Only slightly."

"I didn't know any one had ever seen him before. Where did you meet him?"

"I didn't," Parker responded truthfully, then added by way of explanation. "His credentials are perfectly all right, and the natives, I understand, regard him as a kind of god."

"Yes. I could see that. Even Rattail, at lunch, seemed awed. And he is a Krooboy." A hesitant pause. "I suppose his credentials are strictly private?"

"Oh, yes, quite."

Followed a lazy silence, in which the Great Dane assured himself that he was not allowing Catherine to soften his attitude toward her too much.

When he had first met her at Forcados, he had come to the conclusion that it would not be advisable to meet her too often. That was why he had refused the dinner invitation she had extended to him just a few minutes before. He was going to start back to Warri as soon as he had had an opportunity to question Chief Agwala personally. Arthur Garriman Bark was due to return with Agwala at any moment.

Margaret Jardine also had been compelled to leave more hurriedly than Catherine had hoped. There were unbelievable trade canoes alongside the hulk and Bart Jardine had sent a Kroo-boy with a *chit* that inquired briefly and bluntly if Margaret were going to spend all her time with "those —— Morrisons."

Hogmanay had seen the trade canoes before Margaret did, and when she had gone he had returned to his own beach on a business pretext, and was at that moment playing "The Land o' the Leal" softly and mournfully on the fiddle. To him, the canoes about the hulk marked the beginning of the end of the Combination, and the defeat of his hope that Margaret would leave before the dry season ended.

Charteris bothered him, too. The man knew far too much and always said too little, and although he had intimated his intention to go ashore with Hogmanay, he had not done so. The supplies he wanted, so he had said, could wait till later. Hogmanay thought it would be as well, one of these days, to pay Grandison's beach a visit.

Catherine had the same thought. Elsie, of course, had had it before either of them, but, unlike her elders, she had not kept it to herself.

"I can't understand," Catherine persisted, "how a white man can possibly live like that. A gentleman, I mean. One would think that the filth and the general inconvenience of it would cure him of the experiment in a week."

"Does seem rather insane," the Great Dane admitted. "I know I shouldn't care to try it, and I've done my share of bush travel. But he seems to prove that the thing can be done if a man has enough inclination to do it. The most vivid impression I have of him, too, is that it actually seems to amuse him."

"Yes. Doesn't it?"

Then, as Fran and Elsie who had been joined farther along the deck by Tommy Dillingworth and Captain Walton, became audible on the subject of the slowly vanishing guest, Catherine added with a smile: "I'm afraid Fran—Miss Goddard—doesn't like him. He isn't obvious enough, and she always did hate anything that would not or could not explain. You're quite sure you can't stay for dinner? Surely the affairs of state can afford you the time to eat properly, which I know you can't do on that launch of yours."

"Well—you see—that is really very good of you. But I'm afraid I should have to leave, drinking my coffee on the way down the companion ladder."

"Then we'll have dinner half an hour earlier and save your dignity."

"I haven't any. I was thinking of my manners. Out here we have to try to preserve those so that we won't have forgotten, by the time we go home again, how to eat in public."

"I don't believe you ever forgot the how of anything, once you had really learned it."

Parker laughed. Being a normal human being, he liked to be told that there was something super-human about him. Of course, he had known at Forcados— Confound memories and experience! Why couldn't they let a man drift if he wanted to?

"I've forgotten what synecdoche means," he admitted in a drifting voice, "and if I didn't just vaguely remember that Napoleon or Alexander—I'm really not sure which—had something to do with a place called Arbela, I'm afraid I'd have forgotten whether it was a battle or a lady's name."

"That isn't important. And it isn't what I mean." Catherine rose suddenly. "I'm going to order the cook and Rattail to serve dinner at seven. Will that give you time to drink your coffee like a gentleman? Liqueurs, too?"

"The liqueurs have it," Parker said, and Catherine liked the way he grinned at her.

Yet when she went along the deck to announce the altered dinner hour officially to Captain Walton, her glance traveled up-river to where a one-woman canoe moved idly on toward Grandison's.

CHARTERIS, however, had apparently forgotten that the yacht and everything pertaining to it existed. Neither did he pay any attention to the faster moving canoes that gave him as wide a berth as possible as they passed him by. His single-bladed paddle rose and fell indolently, and his expression indicated an unflattering indifference to his kinship with men, both white and black.

When he reached Grandison's tumble-down gig-wharf and tied up his canoe, there was no sign of Ogulo the dwarf anywhere upon the premises. Everything was peaceful to the point of being uncomfortable, and Charteris ambled up the weed-grown path to the house without so much as a glance at the scurrying lizards that vanished beyond the ragged lime hedges at his approach.

As he climbed the stairs, he looked down-river for the first time since he had left the yacht, and, halting a few minutes, watched Agwala's forty-paddle canoe swinging past Marsden & Co.'s factory toward the *Bonny*. Then he went on again, turning to the right when he reached the veranda.

Ogulo met him just inside the door of Grandison's office.

"He live, sah," he whispered, and there was a bewildered sort of reverence in the dwarf's face as he backed away.

"All right."

Charteris moved across the room to a corner in which there was a little heap of folded blankets. Above the blankets was a crudely made mosquito-curtain frame that, in the day time, looked like a canopy and gave to that corner a throne-like effect.

That he had gone to the trouble of erecting the frame, indicated, if nothing else, that the truly fiendish ravages of the Benin River mosquito affected him upon a par with all mortals. Also, that he expected to make Benin River his headquarters for some little time.

He squatted in the corner, fumbled behind the blankets a moment and produced a tin of cigarets.

"Go bring him," he said to Ogulo as he discovered a box of safety matches in his shirt pocket.

"Yessah."

And presently, trailing after Ogulo like a soul in bondage, Abado the Sobo came in.

THE Sobo trader's demeanor had undergone no change since the morning. If anything, in the presence of "the gray man who never hurried," his eyes became more dull and his knees sagged as though his legs would fold up under him at any moment. His raiment still consisted only of a loin cloth.

When Charteris indicated that he might squat on the floor if he cared to, and ordered Ogulo to go out to the veranda to watch the trend of events on the river, Abado gravely sat down with his arms wrapped about his knees and ignored the departure of the dwarf completely.

"When the python is hungry the monkey climbs higher and is still," Charteris began in the Sobo's own jargon. "And when the leopard hunts, the bush dog creeps the long way round. But the elephant goes his way without thought of anything but man."

"The gray man has the wisdom of the tortoise," Abado admitted humbly to a spot on the floor. "He speaks and all men listen. It is good to be the gray man's friend."

"In seven days Abado the elephant has become Abado the bush dog," Charteris went on unheeding. "His eye is like a smoking lamp and his belly is lean and empty. His skin is like the white man's roads before the rains come, and his legs are but dry sticks that any small boy may break. And Agwala laughs till his fat shakes like a tree in a big wind. Is Abado's wail of death to be the sound of the Jakri man's laughter?"

The Sobo shuddered and his arms tightened about his knees convulsively. But his chin sank lower until only the top of his round crinkly head was visible to Charteris. He had nothing whatever to say.

"When Agwala said that Abado was the son of the mother of pigs," Charteris continued, calmly turning the knife in the wound, "the gray man thinks the Jakri's tongue spoke truth. And when Abado hangs at the end of the white man's rope, Agwala will see Abado hanging there and he will say to his wives and his sons in a voice that will reach to Warri: 'The little pig is dead. For many moons its squealing sounded like the voice of a man, and we were afraid. But it was only a very little pig after all.' "

A Sobo guttural of anguish escaped Abado, and his head lifted wildly. Charteris laughed at him.

"The little pig tries to speak like a man," he taunted, "but it is only the cry of a small boy in the dark. Abado, the elephant, is dead and his spirit has found shelter in a leaf that is ready to fall. It will blow here and there on the wind until the rains come and beat it into the ground. Then the leaf will rot and the soul of Abado, the elephant, will be less than the soul of the little pig the Jakri man will see hanging from a mango tree on the white man's beach."

The Sobo's bloodshot eyes peered at Charteris through half-closed lids. He appeared suddenly to take a really intelligent interest in what Charteris said, and presently he asked in a hoarse whisper:

"Why does the gray man say that Abado will hang from a mango tree on the white man's beach? All men have said that the gray man is wise and that the black man is his little brother. But never have I heard that the gray man was a witch-doctor who spoke of things to be."

"Only a fool speaks of tomorrow," Charteris told him and watched his every movement much more closely than Abado imagined.

"Then it is today I will hang on the white man's beach!"

"Today, if the hand of the white man's law touches you before the sun dies."

"*Cha!*" The Sobo leaped to his feet, stirred to a semblance of his old fighting self. "Does the white man's law hang even if a black man has not raised his hand?"

"The white man's law is life for life," Charteris said simply.

"Eh-heh!" Abado approved, and broke into pidgin-English in his excitement. "Be good! I like him all same he talk so."

"Morrison die, you die. Palaver set."

Abado stared. He also gaped. Even the most simple of monosyllabic exclamations was beyond him.

Charteris' expression was purposely one of bland indifference, as if he did not care whether Abado had killed Morrison or not.

But the Sobo was not satisfied with indifference of that sort. Obviously the information staggered him, and it was plain that his amazement was genuine. Also, as soon as he could make himself understood in any language, it was clear to Charteris that he was going to deny having had anything to do with the murder.

And then it came in a flood; Sobo and Jakri and pidgin-English, all mixed inextricably together; a cry of innocence, at first indignant, then fearful, then a whimpering, childlike burst of pleading for Charteris to believe him. His fear of the white man's law was as pitiful as his belief in Charteris' wisdom and sense of justice was apparently profound. Finally he descended to his knees and, bit by bit, crawled toward Charteris in abject surrender of both body and soul.

"I beg you. I no' do him! I no' savez which man do him! I beg you!"

Charteris permitted him to go on pleading until he was something less than a yard away, then, with a gesture, halted him and asked in Sobo—

"When Abado sat on the white man's

stairs and made ready to die, who asked him to come away?"

"The gray man spoke to my son Etaji, by the mouth of Ogulo the dwarf, and I came away."

"How many times did I speak by the mouth of Ogulo the dwarf?"

Abado's glance shifted apologetically.

"Three times," he answered in a barely audible whisper.

"Three times," Charteris repeated with an edge on his voice. "And if Abado had made me speak a fourth time, Abado would not have been on the white man's stairs to hear."

The Sobo looked up quickly, his expression the sharpest kind of question-mark.

"Because the hand of the white man's law would have touched him," Charteris informed him, "and my message would have been spoken to a thing that hung upon a tree at the end of the white man's rope."

Abado understood perfectly. Again his chin sank slowly upon his breast and his whimpering was stilled. Charteris looked around for his cigaret tin.

"When I talk," he said in pidgin-English, "I talk once." And he held up one finger. "Savez?"

"Yessah," without raising his head.

"All right. Belly hungry?"

"Yessah."

Charteris rose.

"Chop live for galley. *Wah!*"

CHAPTER XI

THIRTY PUNCHEONS

THE Jardines dined late that evening; also the next. Business was so persistently brisk as to be suspicious and Captain Bart Jardine, when he saw so much of his shelf-worn stock disappearing over the hulk's black sides, had little difficulty in convincing himself that virtue, even in the Niger Delta, has its ultimate reward.

"It wasn't Abado that killed Morrison," he told Margaret almost every time he scurried into the sweltering shop-saloon where she paid out cargo at an alarming rate. "It wasn't any man, black or white. It was the hand o' God."

Then Bart would wax religious and point several morals to adorn his discourse, concluding always with the assurance that he was right and knew he was right, —— if he didn't.

Margaret was too busy to pay much attention to her father's volubility, and there was an aspect of the sudden rush of business which she thought he was disposed to overlook.

Few, if any, of the traders who took pay for the oil and kernels they delivered to Jardine were familiar to Margaret. Certainly none of the Benin River traders were among them, and Margaret had the impression of a decidedly foreign element descending upon the hulk in a frenzy of buying and selling that would die out as suddenly as it had begun.

Margaret's duties were equivalent to those of a shop clerk on any Delta trading beach. She paid for the produce bought by her father from the native trader. And since the *Akerri* had become wedded to her mudbank and the purposes of trade, the saloon was no longer a place in which to eat.

It was a shop, fitted with long low benches, on which were displayed print and Madras and "real India"—eight yards to the piece—gorgeous silk handkerchiefs, singlets, shirts and a scattering variety of European clothes generally.

Beneath the benches and the erstwhile dining-table, the lower two-thirds of which was the principal display counter, were small bags of salt and rice, iron pots of all sizes, machetes that were always called "matchets," hammers, axes, hogshead tobacco, lanterns and lamps, canned stuffs, cheap perfumery, yellow soap, and the unnumbered other commodites imported by the white trader for the purpose of encouraging the native's ambition through the medium of his stomach and his vanity.

Otherwise, the saloon, scarred and pockmarked by Time and the impulses of rough-tutored men, was a place of sodden memories that joined hands from the Mersey to the beaches of Old Calabar.

In the right-hand corner, directly facing Margaret, whose desk was the captain's place at the head of the dining-table—the corner where one of the little wall-bracket lamps hung in crumpled ruin—one of the *Akerri's* first officers had been shot in the throat by the second mate, because he had robbed the latter of a girl while on shore leave in Hamburg. The first bullet had smashed the bracket lamp; and the late

Captain Ed Jardine's only comment on the episode had been:

"Just an ordinary girl, too. Cheap as a packet of pins."

On the reverse side of the picture; a young Spanish songstress of Las Palmas, who had an ambition to perform in Madrid, had sung the *Akerri's* former skipper out of the price of her ticket, depriving him at the same time of a considerable measure of his respect for his own good common sense. He had never been very keen about that story, and Margaret had always suspected that romance had touched him that night as a straying wisp of the Spanish girl's black hair might possibly have brushed his cheek.

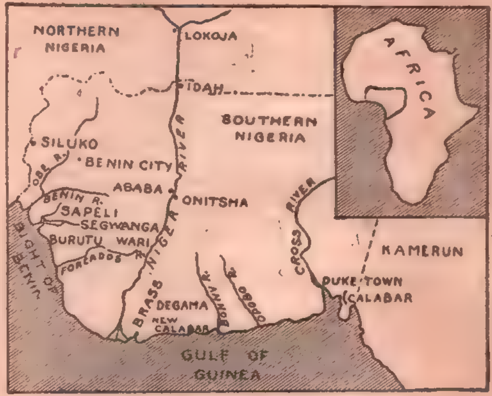
Sometimes, in the light of the white-shaded oil lamp that hung over the table, Margaret could see the girl sitting there, leaning forward. Carmine lips, olive cheeks, a touch of red against the black of her cheap, tinseled gown, her big, dark eyes alive with eagerness and a haunting anxiety, the pulse in her white throat beating furiously as she sang.

Perhaps it was not in the least like that, but Margaret preferred that version. It made the story so much softer than most of the other tales the uninviting little saloon could tell.

And with the steaming swamps of the Delta all about her, with the relentless sun overhead, with the daily doses of the inevitable quinin, and the raw and literally naked elements of life brushing elbows with her at every turn, it was more than merely good to look upon the bright side of things. It was absolutely necessary.

At dinner, on deck, on the evening of the second day, while the mosquitoes hummed incessant chorus about her ears and the hosts of flies and moths made a gray-black shade around the stand-lamp, Margaret did not even pretend to be listening to the various reasons why Morrison had been struck down and why Captain Bart Jardine was one day, on the wings of honest purpose, going to fly higher than Morrison had ever done.

While she was trying to interest her palate in the various items on the menu, which the Accra cook insisted upon putting into writing, and which always concluded with an ornate, rubber-stamped "God Save the King", she was hoping that the flurry in trade would last long enough to dispose of her father's scanty stock. Also, that before he could replenish it, or even indent for another bale of cloth or a single head of tobacco, the hulk would fall apart or become defunct in some equally decisive fashion.



Some such contingency, as far as Margaret could see, constituted her only hope of escape.

"I ain't goin' to get no more of that Turkish red kind o' two-piece cloth," her father informed her suddenly from the other side of the dining-table, just as she finished her coffee and was preparing to rise. "It's too bloody. Makes them niggers think too easy of fightin' and murder, and that ain't good for them. They think of them things too easy as it is.

"Maybe I'll stop selling matchets, too. They're ugly weapons to put in an igerant black man's hand without no guarantee as to what he's goin to do with them. Of course, they've got to have some kind o' knives to make canoes and such, but them matchets is too much knife in my opinion. What do you think?"

Margaret knew that it did not matter what she thought. He would do what he pleased in any case. She knew also that the casual listener would have laughed. Just then, however, for some irritating, unaccountable reason, she was further from laughter than ever, and she thought that if she had to spend many more days such as that had been, in the swelter of the shop-saloon, she would see much virtue in violence or profanity or both.

"Ain't you got a tongue?" her father demanded, since she did not answer quickly enough to suit him. "Here I'm workin' myself to a shadder to make a fortune to keep you out o' the workhouse, and you ain't got interest enough to answer me when I talk to you.

"If I'd ha' took your advice, I'd ha' sold out to Morrison when all the fates was workin' to do to Morrison as he done by us. And now that I'm reapin' my reward, you're sorry he's dead and spend your time—*my* time—lickin' the boots of them daughters of his 's if they was ever one —— bit sorry for us when we were on our uppers and not doin' a bushel of trade a day.

"Ain't I your father? Ain't I done my best to bring you up right, given you a good schoolin' and sweated my life away on them stinkin' gin boats just for to make you independent? And you ain't got no more gratitude than a Kroo-boy and don't do half as much to excuse yourself for livin'! That's what I says, first and last, and I knows I'm right, too, —— if I don't."

Then suddenly speaking past Margaret's left elbow—

"Well, who the —— are you, and what are you doin' on my ship without an invitation?"

CHARTERIS came out of the shadow of a deck-house into the light of the stand lamp, avoided collision with a startled Kroo-boy steward, who stood on Margaret's right, and came to a halt, with his seedy-looking panama in his hand, midway between the girl and her father. Bart Jardine's long, scrawny neck was stretched to its utmost and his popping blue eyes glinted like glass marbles.

"Sorry I've interrupted you at dinner, captain," Charteris apologized. "But I thought nine o'clock late enough to avoid making that kind of nuisance of myself."

"We are at least an hour late," Margaret admitted, and did her best not to seem amazed at his sudden appearance. "Can we offer you anything? I can vouch for the deviled chicken, and we've got the only cook on the river who can prepare Saratoga chips. He used to be on an American cable ship. Ever taste them?"

"You ain't said who you are," Bart Jardine interjected before Charteris could answer. "Or what you're doin' aboard my ship after dark? My daughter ain't the captain here. If you've got anything to say for yourself, report to me."

"Glad to, captain," Charteris said affably. "My name is Charteris and my business here at this unseemly hour is partly a little matter of trade, in which I think you will be interested, but principally a desire to be friendly."

Turning toward Margaret, whose eyes had clouded and narrowed at the mention of trade, he added—

"But for the fact that I dined sumptuously less than an hour ago, I'd be glad to pass judgment on your cook, and to prove it, if you will extend the invitation to another occasion, I'll make a point of bringing my appetite with me."

Margaret smiled, but her father eyed his visitor with a dull, appraising stare.

"Trade, eh? You a trader? I never seen or heard of you afore."

"I don't doubt it. And I must confess I am not a trader. Just dabbling in it meantime for the fun of the thing and thought I could throw something of interest your way."

He looked about him inquiringly.

"May I find myself a chair and smoke?"

Jardine grunted an ungracious affirmative, swore at a steward just to indicate to Charteris that he was the captain on his own ship, then said pointedly to Margaret as Charteris possessed himself of a deck chair and dragged it into the light.

"You met him afore?"

"Yes," as calmly as she could under the circumstances.

"Where?"

"At Marsden's and on the *Bonny*."

"Huh! Hobnobs with them fellows, does he, and then comes down here at this hour to talk trade and be friendly? Why ain't I heard o' him afore this? You ain't said nothin' about meetin' him, and he ain't ordinary enough lookin' to forget about."

He turned his head and took another good look at Charteris, who had just seated himself a little to the left of Jardine's chair and was searching his pockets for a cheap gunmetal cigaret case.

"I don't know as I want to talk to you, mister. Your recommend don't sound good to me, and I've got a lot of indentin' to do. Come back to-morrow and then maybe we'll see."

"Dad!" Margaret was on her feet in a moment. "You don't understand. Mr. Charteris is a gentleman and you have no right to insult him, simply because——"

"Insult! Are you talkin' to me! Sit

down and shut up! This ain't your affair. I'm handling it, and if you ain't satisfied you can get out! I've told you that afore and I'm tellin' it to you again, —— if I ain't!"

He turned sharply toward Charteris only to start back with a throaty gasp of astonishment.

Charteris was at his elbow looking quietly down at him.

"What the ——"

"That'll do, Jardine. I don't like theatricals, particularly now and here. However, since Miss Jardine has been good enough to defend me, the least I can do is to return the compliment."

Jardine laughed foolishly. He leaned back in his chair sidewise, either to get a better look at the other man or to get as far away from him as he could. The Kroo-boy chief steward and his two assistants edged instinctively nearer to Margaret. A close observer might have seen that the scar had taken on a faint red hue that came and went like the beating of a pulse.

"If you are really serious about not wanting to talk to me," Charteris added calmly, "I shall be glad to withdraw. But if you are only bluffing, it isn't at all convincing and—well, your coffee's getting cold."

He backed to his chair and sat down again without even a whisper of protest from Jardine who, just as he always did when Margaret found it necessary to pound him into submission, subsided like a pricked balloon. Aside from mutterings that were intended for his own ears alone, he said no more until the stewards had removed the coffee cups. Then he managed to muster enough courage to ask Charteris whether there was anything he would like to drink.

"Thank you, captain, no. Not at present."

And when the stewards had cleared the table and removed it and themselves from the scene, Charteris added, as he matter-of-factly placed a deck chair for Margaret just a few feet from his own:

"There's some oil I think you can have, if you care to raise your price a little. Thirty puncheons. That's worth a bit more than usual, isn't it?"

"Thirty puncheons!" Jardine said it dully.

He had not bought that much oil, all at once, since he had stepped into his dead brother's shoes. Margaret, murmuring a word of thanks for the chair Charteris had secured her, looked at him more narrowly than ever.

"Yes. A job lot, I imagine it might be called."

Then, seeing how Margaret regarded him, Charteris laughed.

"No, I didn't steal them. Neither did the man who owns them. I can vouch for that. If you want them, I think I can induce him to bring them down. The only stipulation he made was that your usual price would have to go up a bit."

"Thirty puncheons, eh?" Jardine repeated dubiously. "And no gin in the pay?"

"I imagine so. He knows you don't sell the stuff."

"What's his price?"

Jardine's voice was husky with anxiety.

"I haven't the faintest idea. You'll have to talk that over with him."

"How do you——"

"Oh, I just happen to hear of things like that now and then," Charteris interjected smoothly. "And, having met Miss Jardine, I thought you might be interested enough to meet this fellow's terms."

"Who—who is he?"

"Etaji. A Sobo. Trades at Sapeli most of the time, I think. Probably you never heard of him."

"No. He ain't familiar to me. You ever hear of him Marg'ret?"

Margaret shook her head. The whole thing sounded unusual to her, and she was trying with all her might to guess what Charteris' ultimate objective was.

"And where do you come in?" Jardine asked Charteris suspiciously. "Ain't you got nothing to say about the price?"

"Not a word. The oil isn't mine." He laughed. "Of course, if you are afraid it isn't clean business or something of that sort, Etaji can take his oil to Siluko."

"Oh, it ain't that," Jardine declared hastily. "I was just wonderin', that's all."

At this point, Margaret explained to her father who Charteris was, what he did, or rather, did not do, and where he was resident at that time. Jardine eyed him, after that, in a more subdued frame of mind than ever. Nevertheless, after he had asked him again to have a drink, and been again refused, Jardine ordered one for himself and, at the same time, became obsessed with a brilliant idea which he advanced hesitatingly, but with increasing resolution.

"Maybe, if you was to bring me some more trade like that, at the regular price, I could pay you a commission?"

"Why, Dad! Mr. Charteris isn't ——"

"Now, just leave my business to me, Marg'ret. I don't need you to help me run it. If he's got anything to say let him speak for hisself. He's got a tongue o' his own, ain't he?"

"I think so," Charteris admitted. "And your idea seems to me to be quite good. How much trade can you handle, captain?"

"As much as you can bring in," Jardine retorted challengingly.

"You're sure of that?"

"Well, now," Jardine hedged, "I ain't sure o' nothin' 'cept death and taxes, as the fellow said, and maybe on account o' slack times, my stock ain't as full as it might be. But that ain't here or there, now. I'm goin' to do a lot o' indentin', as I said, and I was just tellin' Marg'ret I was thinkin' I wouldn't sell no more matchets, because o' them being too dangerous in the hands of an igerant nigger.

"But I got to think about that a day or two, and maybe powder and lead shot and them muzzle-loadin' guns and such ought to be left out, too. I ain't in this business only to make money, mister. I'm here to help them black fellows, an' not burn out their stomachs with rotten gin or blow them full o' holes with bits o' rusty iron. And as I was tellin' Marg'ret——"

"How much stock have you?" Charteris asked when he thought Jardine had said enough.

"How much? Well, now, that—that ain't none o' your —— business as I can see. You bring me the trade and I'll pay for it, even if I've got to pay cash."

"Cash isn't what they want," Margaret declared on an impulse, and wondered if Charteris really could or would do what he said.

She was sure that, to him, her father's proposal was a huge joke, and that he was playing with it just to amuse himself for the moment.

"It ain't eh?" Jardine demanded. "Who asked you to say what they want or don't want? If I says they'll take cash——"

"They probably won't," Charteris interrupted mildly. "They'd have to turn it into goods to be able to do business in their own markets. However, never mind about that now. When your stock runs out, you can't take any more trade. That's simple enough."

"It ain't goin' to run out! I'm goin' to indent——"

"All right. That's settled." Then very seriously, as Gola brought Jardine the drink he had ordered, "Better begin indenting at once, hadn't you?"

"I'm goin' to. And we'll talk about the commission I'll pay you, when I see what kind o' trade you send me. I ain't buyin' a pig in a poke at my age."

"I don't blame you at all," Charteris said, and rose when Jardine did. "Good night, captain."

"G'night. Don't break your neck goin' down my companion ladder."

Margaret silently escorted Charteris on his murky way to the top of the companion-ladder and, arriving there, she paused.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked quietly.

"Perhaps I am doing it because I am mercenary," Charteris suggested.

"I don't believe that. But, in any case, I hope you do it."

"Why?"

"Because—oh, I might as well be truthful about it for once. I'm tired of it."

"How astonishing! Such a nice old boat as she is, too. You'd like to sell out and shut up shop?"

Margaret laughed nervously.

"I'd go further than that if I had any dynamite."

"I thought so. Cooking Yorkshire pudding and picking strawberries would be better than changing piece cloth into kernels and eating liquid butter? Perhaps—Of course, this is only a suggestion—if you were not so anxious to conceal the curl in your hair——"

Margaret's breath caught sharply. She could not see Charteris' face very well in the dark, but she knew he was not smiling. His left hand leaned lightly on the rail, his right held his hat. He showed not the slightest disposition to be familiar. Margaret laughed.

"I didn't know that I exhibited any kind of anxiety," she said, feeling shaky in her absurd embarrassment. "And the curl might not stay curled."

"Still, I do not have to elucidate?"

"I—I don't know. Perhaps you'd better."

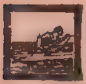
Charteris shook his head.

"Isn't necessary. Just think it over." He held out his hand. "Good night, Miss Jardine."

Margaret gave him her hand with some hesitation. It was an altogether new experience for her to be afraid of any man, yet she was in no wise relieved when he started down the companion-ladder to his canoe. Because the fear was not physical. There was an uncanny sensation of being lifted up—out of oneself—without warning; and then of being dropped back again, without any compunction, so suddenly that it jarred.

Yet, as she watched the vague shadow of him vanish into the black outline of the bush, she could not help feeling that, in his own queer way, he liked her and wanted to help. She walked to her deck cabin still tinglingly conscious of the touch of his hand.

Her first impulse was a mirror. Therefore her second lacked enthusiasm. It was, more prosaically, a cook-book. She had never cooked Yorkshire pudding.



CHARTERIS heard the light splashing sound behind his canoe for a full minute before he paid any heed to it.

Then, turning his head and seeing a small, dusky hand grip the canoe's tail, he said in a low, friendly voice.

"All right, Noni. Hop in. No man look you now."

CHAPTER XII

TWO CASES IN COURT

"I'M AFRAID I am a vulgarian, Noni," Charteris said confidentially. "To-night I have descended to the mean level of trade, advised a woman to get married and held her hand for at least three seconds longer than was necessary. That is the inevitable danger of having anything to do with mine own people. They're a sentimental breed. Soft. And their influence is correspondingly degrading."

"I no savez," Noni said respectfully.

She was kneeling, dripping wet, like a shiny black goddess of the waters, on the tail of the canoe, and though her tone was tractable enough, it was evident that she had no liking for the performance.

"What's matter Abado want me to do so? Missy Cap'n Jardine go make palaver for me?"

"That's highly probable. But duty, my child, is the grandest and sternest word in our language, and there was simply nothing else for it."

"I no savez," Noni said again, a little less respectfully. "My brudder say Abado want me to do so, all same Abado go die. He talk tru'?"

"Absolutely."

Noni did not understand that either, and though she persisted in trying to discover why one of her numerous brothers had visited her late that afternoon to instruct her to leave the hulk in so unusual a manner, Charteris did not become any more explicit as he paddled his slow way up river toward Grandison's.

He glanced toward the dim lights of the yacht as they passed, and beyond them he noted that a lamp burned in Hogmanay's office. Swift and black the river raced between, and phantom-like canoes, slapping lazily by, gave forth but little sound of life, save the occasional grunting of an overfed paddle-boy.

Grandison's was in darkness. But Ogulo was on the gig-wharf when Charteris reached it, and the moment the latter stepped ashore, followed reluctantly and dubiously by Noni, the dwarf whispered.

"Gov'ment man come."

"Which gov'ment man?"

"Bark. I look him. He go 'way. Maybe so he come back. I no savez."

"What a pity. I should have liked to have seen Bark. He look you?"

"No, sah."

Charteris turned to Noni who had been eyeing Ogulo with warranted suspicion.

"Wet cloth no good. We go get blanket."

The girl followed without demur, and in a few moments she was wrapped from neck to heel, like an Indian squaw, in one of Charteris' blankets. When Ogulo had lighted a small kerosene lamp and placed it on the floor of the room which Charteris had claimed for his own, Noni squatted near it and waited placidly for the next move.

Apparently she knew of no reason why she should fear any hurt at her father's hands. Certainly she did not know that she had been brought there to be put on trial for her life.

While Ogulo went in search of Abado,

Charteris stepped on to the veranda to keep a watchful eye upon the river. He hoped that the light of the lamp would induce Arthur Garriman Bark to return. It would undoubtedly be much better for Arthur to come to him, than he to be compelled to go in pursuit of Arthur.

Ogulo found Abado in the galley; also Abado's eldest son, Etaji, a big, raw-boned Sobo, naked above the waist and as unemotional as an owl.

They had spent an unhealthy hour dodging Bark, and though Abado appeared to have taken a new, if sullen, lease on life, he wore his overcloth much as Noni wore her blanket; and, having partaken of both food and drink, his manner suggested that the latter had consisted of a drop too much of palm wine.

He made no comment when Ogulo advised the arrival of Noni; but Etaji, who also had been too intimate with a demijohn, greeted the announcement with a grunt of satisfaction and hurried eagerly up the rickety galley stairs. Abado, preceding Ogulo, followed solemnly and leisurely after.

The moment Noni lifted her big squirrel eyes and saw Etaji come so silently and swiftly into the room, she knew that his intentions were far from amiable. His unemotional, owl-like look was gone. In its stead was a bristling desire for violence that, in simple truth, was too inflamed by palm wine to wait for a more fitting opportunity. His pleasure at finding Noni alone was a hideous thing.

Noni's mouth opened, but the sound she made was immaterial. Unable to reach her feet quickly enough because of the trailing length of the blanket, she crouched away from him, gapingly intent upon his eyes and hands.

Etaji did not raise his voice. He stood over the girl and, in a low, waspish monotone, hurled Sobo epithets at her head, cursing the Jakri mother who had borne her, as efficiently and completely as he could in the time at his disposal.

Then, as the scuffling of Abado and Ogulo's naked feet came to his ears, his rage suddenly mounted to a wild fanatical frenzy, and as swiftly as a conjuror produces a rabbit from a hat, he snatched from the folds of his overcloth an ugly, broad-bladed Hausa dagger.

Noni screamed. The sight of the naked steel loosened her voice, and Etaji's lunging body made her stupefied muscles stir enough to allow her instinctively to roll away from him.

Etaji struck, and the blade sank into the folds of the blanket with sickening ease. Fortunately, there was none of Noni in that part of the blanket. Though she was momentarily pinned to the floor, something like a pig in a sack, Etaji had lost grip on the haft of the knife as a result of his furious eagerness, and, ere he could recover himself, there were encircling arms about his waist.

They were not Noni's arms. She was only half-conscious when Etaji's floundering weight was removed from her head.

The arms were Ogulo's, and they were wound about Etaji's waist like the coils of a constrictor, lifting him up and up until the small of the Sobo's back was hugged against Ogulo's barrel chest. Then the dwarf grinned. Etaji, with what breath was left in his body, screeched in agony.

Abado stood in one doorway, Charteris in the other. Both saw the Hausa dagger that pinned Noni's blanket to the floor so perilously close to Noni's head. They saw Etaji kicking his legs in mid-air—glimpsed his protruding eyes, his pain and terror as he shifted his head this way and that—and Charteris saw Ogulo's grin. All in the space of a few seconds.

Charteris barked an order that filled the room with a low sharp thunder. But Ogulo-of-the-long-arms had not killed a man in many moons, and surely this man should die! To him Charteris' voice was but a whisper, and he paid no heed.

Presently, he thought, when the feebly kicking legs of his victim would cease to kick, he would lift Etaji higher than his head, and hurl him from him again and again till his broken body no longer squirmed or twitched. Then would Etaji be forever damned—just as he was.

In the midst of these promising prognostications, Ogulo felt a hand fasten itself in the nape of his neck, while the vagrant thumb of another hand searched for and found his left eye.

A split second later, Ogulo stood upon his toes, a harsh guttural of pain leaping simultaneously from his throat. He dropped Etaji with a suddenness that would have been as unpleasant as it was inconvenient, if Etaji had been in any condition to know anything about it.

The Sobo lay where he fell, and as Ogulo flung up his hand to tear Charteris's excruciating grip away from his face, Charteris made no effort to contend the possession. On the contrary, he released Ogulo so quickly that the dwarf was wholly unprepared for the next move.

Just a little shove, a single step backward, a flying, but accurate right toe, and Ogulo sprawled across Etaji's unmoving form without let or hindrance.

He did not stay down. Neither did Charteris' second attempt meet with quite as much success. Ogulo was too far away—and going. He went down-stairs four at a time, his shadow of a soul shrinking almost to nothingness in a fear that drove all thought of man-killing out of his stunted body. It sent him down to his post on the gig wharf with a horrible sensation that the gray man's eyes were burning holes in the middle of his back.

Charteris, however, did not follow any farther than the top of the stairs. Then, with a light and wholly unmusical laugh, he went back to his room again to find Abado bending inquiringly over Etaji.

Noni, having pulled the Hausa dagger out of the blanket and the floor, stood shrinkingly in a corner holding the ugly weapon tightly in her hand, as though prepared for anything.

Charteris simply held out his hand, and the girl, glancing furtively past him toward her father and her now feebly stirring brother, relinquished the knife into his keeping without a word. He quietly ordered her to sit down and set her the example by seeking his corner and seating himself among his scanty possessions, to which he added the knife as a matter of course.

Finding himself a cigaret, he said to Abado through a cloud of smoke:

"Etaji finis'. When he fit to walk, he walk home. Palaver set."

Abado raised his head slowly, altogether sobered by his son's startling attempt to take the law of the family into his own hands. He glanced at Charteris, ignored Noni completely, then looked heavily down upon Etaji again.

"He finis'. I savez. Palaver set."

And that was all.

He rose and, choosing a spot on the right of the room midway between Noni and Charteris, sat down, folded his arms about his knees and waited for Etaji to recover of his own accord. No one spoke. Charteris finished one cigaret and lighted another. Noni huddled in her blanket, watching her father and Etaji out of the corner of her eyes.

Presently her brother staggered wildly to his feet, drawing deep and tortured breaths into his lungs. He stared unbelievingly at Noni, searched inquiringly in the folds of his overcloth for the absent knife, then, because his legs weaved uncertainly under him, he lurched against the nearest wall for support.

Charteris said to him after a minute or so:

"Etaji finis'. Go home. Palaver set."

Etaji did not understand that at first. So Charteris repeated it, and Abado confirmed it by paying not the slightest attention to his son's protests and pleas.

When Etaji was convinced that sentence had been passed upon him, he flung himself at Abado's feet, groveled, whined, beat his forehead soundly upon the floor, tore at his crinkly hair and generally indicated that if the light of his father's eyes did not shine benignly upon him, life was well lost for him. Had he pleaded with a stone image, he would have received as much satisfaction. And finally, Charteris ordered him, simply and concisely, to shut up and get out.

Etaji departed. With moaning lamentations he trailed from the room and down the galley stairs, cogitating sadly on the evils of palm wine and his ever too-hasty knife-hand.

Without a further word of comment upon the matter, Charteris turned to Noni and asked her to give him her closest attention.

This was not so easy. The girl could still hear the low hum of the vibrating knife blade as its point was buried in the pitch pine floor within the fraction of an inch from her ear. A sound like that, in the circumstances under which Noni heard it, is likely to interfere with all other sounds for some little time.

Nevertheless, when Charteris began to speak, Noni listened. In less than a minute she heard nothing but the simply constructed sentences that fell from his tongue. And it was not that the voice had any hypnotic effect; it was simply the burden of what he said.

Briefly he explained to her the position in which her evidence, given before the provincial commissioner, had placed her father. He further made clear the circumstance that Abado, being a fugitive from justice, was fleeing, not only from the government's officers, but also from his enemies.

Agwala would be only too anxious to assist the government in its search of Abado, and, plausibly enough, deliver him up more dead than alive.

Noni stared. Her eyes seemed to grow bigger and bigger every moment, as she gapingly appreciated Abado's situation. She realized it so well after a while that she looked upon her father fearfully as upon the shadow of one who was already dead.

Agwala was great. Agwala was rich. Agwala never slept.

And Abado was in his hands, between his finger and his thumb, like the broken shell of a ground-nut.

THE darkness beyond the light of the little lamp deepened perceptibly. Vague night sounds upon the river seemed to become muffled in a moment. She knew now why Etaji had struck.

Her tongue, innocent of any evil intention, had betrayed her father into almost unescapable danger, and there was but one sequel to that. Etaji, drunk on palm wine, had tried to consummate that sequel.

But he was only the first. The others would not be so precipitate nor so careless, and Noni had too many relatives to escape the vengeance of all of them. At once, and in a frantic haste, she crawled nearer to Charteris.

"I no savez gov'ment palaver. Them Bark man say he be Abado frien'. I think he be big man for gov'ment, and no fit to lie. He talk sweet mouf too much!"

She glanced toward Abado, but he had nothing to say. Charteris also was silent, but Noni was quick to appreciate that his sympathies would be more surely reached than those of her father, and she crawled still nearer with the evident intention of putting herself definitely under his protection.

"I talk true! I no savez them Bark man's sweet mouf talk. I be small so-so girl. I no savez gov'ment lie palaver!"

Charteris nodded coldly. Noni smiled. It was a pitiful little smile, something like a watery glint of sunlight when the black tornado clouds are making all things scurry for cover.

But she stopped edging nearer to the queer gray man who had a small-boy's face. She knew that she had gone as near as she dared; knew it without knowing why, and even then she wondered vaguely if Missy Cap'n Jardine or the white mammies on the white ship would ever go any nearer.

But that was not why she smiled. She had crawled up to the gates of a hope and found them barred. Fear, sickening and terrible, raced down her spine to the soles of her little feet, and shook her lithe young body as death shakes the lean frames of the very old; and yet Noni smiled.

Men have earned the Victoria Cross for lesser deeds of valor than that.

Then, nervously and pitifully alternating between pidgin and Sobo, and speaking as as child speaks when it is confronted with a mystery, she told Charteris again that because Arthur Garriman Bark was a government agent, who had claimed that the government had always been friendly to Abado, she had believed him. She had trusted him more surely when he pointed out that if it had not been for the white man Abado would still be a small boy.

The white man, Bark had said, had given Abado's genius for trade a chance to express itself, had protected him at all times and prevented Agwala from harming him. The white man, therefore, was unquestionably Abado's friend, and in the matter of the alleged boycott, of which Bark had heard whisperings, the white man's government was anxious to protect Abado's future in trade.

He, Bark, was the representative of the white man's government. Consequently he, too, was Abado's friend. There could be no doubt about it. It would be to Abado's interest if Noni would tell the truth to the big commissioner.

At this point Abado raised his head and looked searchingly at his daughter. Evidently he was considerably astonished at the trend her defense had taken, and she stopped speaking as though the look he gave her had put a clamp upon her tongue.

Charteris remained impassively indifferent. Ostensibly he was content to leave Noni's fate in her father's hands.

And amid a silence so deadly that the chattering of Noni's perfect little teeth was painfully audible, Abado rose slowly to his feet. Then, to Noni's everlasting surprize, he said to Charteris simply, if cryptically—

"The lie is brighter than the light on the white man's ships."

Abado referred to the search-light carried by some stern-wheelers.

"Abado, the tortoise speaks," Charteris returned sonorously, aparently understanding what the Sobo meant. "Did not the gray man say she had no evil on her tongue?"

"The gray man can look at the sun at noon," Abado admitted generously. "It's good for the head to think before the edge of the knife is sharpened on the stone."

"Abado's eyes are young again," Charteris encouraged soothingly. "They are like a bush cat's in the dark."

The big Sobo's great shoulders squared and his head lifted. He began to pace up and down the floor like a caged animal, emitting low growls of resentment against captivity.

Noni, much to her relief, could feel herself drifting into the background of events, and Charteris, who knew that Abado's mental development along certain, clearly defined lines was little more than that of a child, allowed him to indulge his conceit for several minutes without interruption. Then he asked pointedly—

"Is the voice of one the voice of many times ten?"

Abado halted. He was not at all sure of the answer.

"And is Agwala the rain and the wind and the heat of the sun that Abado should cower and shake and sweat with fear?"

A Sobo expletive was the reply to that, and with a sudden movement, Abado's overcloth came down from his shoulders and descended to his waist, to be fastened there in a savagely made twist-knot that expressed, in all probability, what he would do to Agwala's neck if he ever had the opportunity.

"Agwala is the empty voice of the tom-tom," he said, and with an added expression of contempt that was unprintable, and which relegated the Jakri chieftain into the uttermost depths of inconsequence, he turned toward Noni and regarded her heavily for the longest minute of her young life.

"The gray man has drawn your throat away from the edge of the knife."

Noni's heart thumped wildly, but she uttered no sound. Neither did she move nor even glance in Charteris's direction.

"Go back to the white mammy's ship."

Noni hardly believed her ears. She knew perfectly well that that judgment was not Abado's.

"And remember that your tongue and your eyes and your ears are the gray man's till you die. Palaver set."

Noni said "*Doh*" respectfully, then rose as Abado turned his back upon her. She glanced toward Charteris, and knowing that her life virtually had lain in the cup of his hand, she was thankful enough for the mercy of his intervention.

But perhaps it was then that Noni-of-the-little-feet actually became a woman. She did not extol Charteris for his wisdom. Nor did she thank him for saving her from a bush dog's death. With her head a little on one side and giving a tilt of indifference to her chin, she said casually:

"I t'ink so my cloth be dry now. I go look him. Be all ri'?"

Charteris nodded. If he had smiled he would have forfeited much of Noni's respect; and when she returned from the veranda where her overcloth had been hanging on the rail to dry, she gave him back his blanket and asked simply—

"I go?"

Again Charteris nodded. Then he said in a low tone:

"You go live for hulk sof'ly, sof'ly. When Abado man come dere you no savez nothing. You no talk for Abado man li'l bit. When gov'ment man come dere, you be all same your tongue done die. But when Agwala man come dere—you talk sweet mouf and have plenty big ear. Bark be Agwala man. Savez?"

Noni did and started perceptibly. She glanced quickly toward Abado who had resumed his restless pacing of the floor, but found that he was not even interested.

"I savez," she admitted to Charteris in a low voice.

"All right. Suppose you be proper big ear for gray man, he 'member Noni long time. Ogulo go take you for hulk in my canoe. Tell him be so I talk. He live for gig-wharf."

Noni went out and down the stairs toward the gig-wharf in a daze.

She was still the daughter of Abado, but was evidently under the jurisdiction of the gray man who did not like women. And Bark was the agent of Agwala!

These were things to think about.

Ogulo, who was sitting on the gig wharf when Noni reached it, did nothing to disturb her thoughts. He had been cheated of a life that had surely belonged to him, and having recovered somewhat from his fear of the gray man's eyes, he was thinking sorrowfully of his wrongs and nursing an inflamed left eye at the same time.

He accepted with a grunt the instructions Noni gave him and appeared to welcome the opportunity to get away from his observation post, if only for a little while. The fact that Noni was possibly the most attractive girl of his own color on the river, did not seem to occur to him, and he made no reference to the murderous attack Etaji had made upon her.

Noni did not encourage conversation. Seated behind him on the silent and cautious journey back to the hulk, she thought of her wrongs, too, and of how the happenings of the night would affect her future; or what there was left of it.

She was but one of Abado's many daughters. Off-hand, it is doubtful if she could have told how many half-sisters she had, and she acted as Margaret Jardine's maid principally to avoid coming prominently to her father's daily attention.

Now she would be in his thoughts every hour, and though the gray man had saved her from a vengeance of blood, Abado would not forget.

Because she was her mother's daughter, he would sell her, without thought of her worth, to some small-boy Sobo trader, whose price would be but little, whose wives laden with brass, would be of the Sobo breed, and who would expect her sons to be Sobo!

Noni's quick black eyes seemed to retreat into her head when she thought of that. Her flesh chilled as though a Harmattan mist had come suddenly down from the North and she became acutely conscious of the fact that she had bones.

Then, and inevitably, she thought of Arthur Garriman Bark. And her mood changed as swiftly as Ogulo's ape-like arms rose and fell. Her eyes burned like live coals and her savage, revengeful little heart rose up into her throat in the impotence of her voiceless fury. She was caught in the jaws of a trap and Arthur Garriman Bark had set it. The result was neither pretty nor promising—for Arthur.

Ogulo grinned. He did not even have to turn his head to know that the edge of her rage was keen. He could hear the grating of her teeth.

And when he had slipped noiselessly under the hulk's rope-ladder, he whispered insinuatingly up to Noni as she began to climb on board.

"The anger of little arms is like a broken paddle."

A moment later the hard sole of one of Noni's little feet descended ungratefully upon his nose, and he sat down in Charteris' canoe so suddenly that it almost capsized. When his eyes were free of the involuntary tears that sprang into them and he could see clearly again, Noni had vanished.

Ogulo, however, merely grunted despairingly, brought the canoe around with a single sharp twist of the paddle and headed up-stream.

Even though a Jakri man was poor and accursed, without sheep or goats or slaves to sacrifice and do him honor, he did not waste the precious breath of life in rage against a woman.

CHAPTER XIII

QUEER BUSINESS

ARTHUR GARRIMAN BARK did not return to Grandison's beach that evening. But the matter did not rest there.

Malkett himself decided to stroll in upon Charteris two days later, and the *Bonny's* rail was lined with excitement when the government launch came frothing back to the yacht.

The excitement subsided like a pricked balloon, however, as soon as Malkett's expression was clear enough to be understood. Though he had nothing to say, it was plain that his journey had been altogether fruitless.

Catherine, who had acquired an appearance of grim inquiry in the past few days, and who was determined she would not be ignored, followed Malkett into the library.

"Didn't you see him?" she asked without mincing matters, and giving but little thought to such considerations as official reserve.

Malkett's grin was sour.

"He offered me a cigaret and a drink."

"But why should Agwala accuse him of a thing like that if——"

Malkett's eyes halted Catherine abruptly, and she had a momentary feeling that he thought she was being too inquisitive.

"You never can be sure why these fellows say the things they do," he replied patiently enough.

"Then you don't really believe it?"

"I believe everything I see, Miss Morrison, when I'm sure my eyes are in good working order. Up there I saw nothing but the Charteris man and an ugly black dwarf, who appeared to be installed as Charteris' house-boy."

Catherine nodded dubiously. Whether she was relieved or sorry was not clear.

"Of course—of course, you did not tell him what Agwala said?"

"Hardly."

"All right. Thanks. I—that is—I don't want to seem impatient or——"

"I know that," Malkett interrupted with a heavy sort of sympathy. "I'm going to have another talk with Agwala to-day and —well, we'll see."

"Is he coming here?"

Malkett nodded.

"Three o'clock."

"Oh—er—thank you."

Catherine went out on deck and loitered a minute or two near the rail, as if the somber-appearing cargo boat that had come up from Forcados that morning were of absorbing interest to her. Then she joined Fran Goddard, who was curled up in a deck chair, expressing her profane opinion of the crawling heat and the savage glare of the sun.

"I think my eyes are getting woozy," she told Catherine at once. "And perhaps I ought to wear blinders or something. But my sight isn't so defective that I can't see what's wrong with you. You're beginning to look like Tommy Dillingworth."

"Don't talk rot!"

As she found a chair, Catherine added quietly—

"Agwala's coming back this afternoon."

"Is he? That'll be interesting. I like to watch him roll up the companion ladder and roll down again. For heaven's sake, don't stare like that! You look as if you had just choked on your daily portion of quinin."

Catherine glanced slowly up-river. She gave not the slightest heed to Fran's conception of cheerfulness.

"I wonder if Agwala lied?" she asked at last and straightened, dabbing her forehead lightly with a flimsy handkerchief.

"Possibly. Why don't you go up and find out?"

"Oh, rubbish!" Catherine sat up impatiently. "You do make the most idiotic suggestions. You know perfectly well that if Malkett and Bark couldn't prove it, I couldn't."

"Doesn't follow at all. Malkett's a fathead and that Bark person is so afraid of Charteris his shoestrings shiver. Watch him the next time you get a chance."

"But Bark went up there the other night."

"Yes. And came back with the story that Charteris wasn't on the premises. I'll bet he knew that before he started."

"How——"

Catherine stopped and waited until the crinkly uniformed second officer had passed up the deck, forward.

"Oh, what's the use of us trying to straighten it out?"

"None in the wide world," Fran agreed and studied the Jardine hulk for a moment or two. "I'd like to see that thing sink or blow up or something. What did Malkett have to say about your mop-haired friend?"

"Nothing. He didn't find anything."

"Did he expect to?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure whether he believes Agwala or not."

Catherine's glance shifted along the deck to where Tommy Dillingworth was engaged in earnest, monotoned conversation with Elsie.

"Those two youngsters are becoming altogether too sympathetic," she added absently. "And I'm certain Elsie doesn't mean a word of it."

"Of course not. She wouldn't enjoy it so much if she did. Isn't this heat devilish?"

"Not any worse than it was yesterday." Catherine rose suddenly. "I'm going over to talk to Sandy MacGregor. Coming?"

"If I don't you'll grouse all afternoon," Fran returned, getting to her feet, but paying more attention to the hulk than to Catherine. "Lord! What have we got to grumble about?" she asked mumblingly of no one in particular.

"Nothing," Catherine answered and walked quickly to the rail and looked over. "Except that Malkett's gone ahead of us."

Fran sat down again.

"All right. We can wait."

Catherine remained at the rail ostensibly watching Malkett depart in the government launch for Hogmanay's. But, most of the time, her eyes were trying to find some sign of life on Grandison's beach.

HOGMANAY had had little to say since the disappearance of Abado. Even when he learned that the Sobo's thirty puncheons of oil—those that had lain so patiently alongside his breakwater—had found a haven in the hold of the Jardine hulk the previous day, he merely grunted and tested the strings of his 'cello in a ponderous kind of thoughtfulness that presaged something akin to "Lochaber No More."

Jardine might be ignorant of the true ownership of the thirty puncheons, but it required something more than a fictitious name to conceal the truth from so experienced a trader as Hogmanay.

Under the gracious mercy of a gently swinging punkah, he held terse, low-voiced conferences with nondescript natives who came and went like shadows that moved sidewise, and while they remained, their contribution to the conversation was largely monosyllabic.

In the intervals between, as Hogmanay abstractedly watched the river and the hulk and the cargo boat that was anchored between the *Bonny* and the opposite bank of the river, his glance, like Catherine's, would rove, every now and then, in the direction of Grandison's beach.

But though trade turned upside down and continued to whirl around in circles, he methodically bought what came his way, shipped his stock of oil and kernels and rubber, together with a sizeable raft of mahogany logs that had come down from the Nawamba concession, and ignored the cargo boat's skipper's pointed reference to the astonishing shipment Jardine was making.

When Malkett arrived to make a pretense of growling about the "damnable job" of trying to find any one in the haystack of the Delta bush, drank his whisky neat, and insidiously invited Hogmanay to be confidential and enlightening, MacGregor looked toward the Jardine hulk and said indefinitely:

"Aye. You're right. It's a queer business. But it's no a bit queerer than that."

"Than what?"

"That batch o' canoes that are fussin' around the hulk like chickens around a hen."

Malkett laughed.

"Makes your teeth water, eh?"

"No, man, no' that. But it makes my head keep turning round all the time."

Malkett was not taking the hint when he asked pointedly:

"Well, what's your verdict on Charteris now?"

"You were up there yoursel', this morning," Hogmanay returned easily. "You ought to be able to answer that better than I can. Get anything?"

"Nothing."

"I thought ye wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because I've a notion that Agwala was lyin'," Hogmanay lied deliberately.

"Yes. I'm afraid so," Malkett agreed and rose. "He's coming to the *Bonny* this afternoon. Want to come over?"

"No," decisively. "When I want to see Agwala, I'll send for him."

Malkett regarded Hogmanay for several long seconds.

"You're so confoundedly helpful," he said at last. "You're almost as helpful as Bark."

Hogmanay walked noncommittally to the head of the stairs with his visitor.

"If ye happen to be leanin' on Arthur," he said quietly, "don't lean too hard."

"Thanks," shortly. "'By."

Hogmanay went back to his corner and continued to watch the hulk and its attendant canoes.

Presently a scrawny Jakri boy in a loincloth came scuffling upstairs to stand respectfully before him. The boy looked as if he had been spending the night with ghosts. His name, for simplicity's sake, was Bed.

"He dere, sah," he announced in a nervous whisper, and MacGregor could see his knees shake.

"At Grandison's?"

"Yessah. I look him."

"When?"

"Morning time, sah. He go for back beach bush them time I look him. Plenty Sobo man live for back beach bush, sah. I no fit to come 'way for long time."

"You look gray man, too?"

The Jakri boy gulped. His color was that of one who was very sick.

"I—I fear, sah."

"Toots! Ye're daft. Wait."

"Yessah."

MacGregor rose, and when he had procured a little gin, the boy's legs steadied a bit and his tongue became more sure of itself.

"I fear gray man, sah. He *ju-ju.* I no fit to go for dat place 'gain. All Jakri man fear."

"Aye. I know about that." Hogmanay wrote something on a slip of paper. "This be book. Go for shop. Mas' Garland go pay. Tomorrow time, when you done sleep li'l bit, we go talk."

"I—I fear, sah. I no fit to go dere 'gain."

"All right. Palaver set."

Bed went down-stairs looking vastly relieved, and Hogmanay once more returned to his corner, his brows lowering heavily.

Evidently Agwala, when he had gratuitously informed Daniel Dane Parker that Charteris was sheltering Abado at Grandison's beach, had told the truth!

Neither the Great Dane nor Malkett had shown a disposition to believe it. In offering the information, Agwala had incontinently betrayed so decided an antipathy and fear of "the gray man," that his anxiety to encourage the immediate use of the government's military arm to rout Charteris out of his stronghold at Grandison's, had been so palpably a policy of self-interest, that there was little danger of the suggestion being acted upon.

More than that, it had at once suggested to Parker that whatever aid the government secured from Agwala in the matter of Abado's capture would be highly colored with malice. So that it behooved the officers of the government to move cautiously, to keep a watchful eye upon the character of Agwala's activities and to see to it that the white man's justice was not tinged with the fat chief's lust for revenge.

Hogmanay knew this. He believed, also, that Parker was, for some reason or other, satisfied that Charteris was simply an interested spectator. In any case, the Great Dane had gone back to Warri without taking any personal action in the matter, and though, as Hogmanay knew from experience, he was likely to return at any moment and become excessively active in a most unexpected direction, MacGregor was reasonably sure that the provincial commissioner did not appreciate Charteris at his true worth.

And while the Jakri boy's rather submerged confirmation of this assumption was conclusive enough, it did not, from Hogmanay's standpoint, clarify the issue in the least. In fact, it served only to confuse it.

It was one thing to know that Abado was being sheltered at Grandison's beach, but it was an entirely different matter to prove it. For several potent reasons, Hogmanay was not prepared to act upon Bed's evidence immediately.

Malkett, who was no fool in an investigation of the kind, had demonstrated that a personally conducted inspection of Grandison's beach, unless it was supported by a company of Hausa or Yoruba soldiers, would produce nothing. And a flourish of military authority, which was, of course, a last resort, was equally the last thing Hogmanay wished to invite to Benin River.

Most important of all, however, was the unhappy circumstance that, in direct violation of the momentous Forcados agreement with Morrison, native trade scouts were persistently supplying MacGregor with the information that Agwala was doing a considerable part of his business with the Siluko and Koratown independents on a credit basis!

Therefore, Hogmanay had every reason to pause before he placed himself in the position of playing policeman for Agwala. Although the evidence against the skulking Abado was strong, MacGregor was not the man to move recklessly in obedience to a blind impulse of vengeance.

Undoubtedly Charteris had a motive for affording Abado his moral support; a motive that was in some way connected with the motley group of up-river traders who had ignored the Bwallatown and Sapeli trading-factories to come all the way down to the Jardine hulk.

Almost hourly, a little here and a little there, Hogmanay's information was becoming full enough to encourage him to give less and less thought to the mystery of Charteris' origin or the reason for his uncanny influence on the susceptible native mind.

He was now principally concerned with the motives that were behind the man; most particularly as they applied to Marsden & Co. The sheltering of Abado made these motives still more obscure, and Hogmanay had no desire to be too precipitate or to go fumbling around in the dark.

Of course, no man could be permitted to disturb the equilibrium of Marsden & Co. without coming under the ban of MacGregor's extreme displeasure. But as this applied equally to Agwala, Hogmanay was in some doubt as to whom he should tackle first. He thought a little more rope would not to any harm in either instance.

He was thinking rather grimly of this when the *Bonny's* launch slipped alongside the gig-wharf.

"CATH wants you to go up with her to visit the mop-man," Fran announced when she and Catherine had found chairs in the less glaring quiet of Hogmanay's office.

"I don't want to do anything of the sort," Catherine declared. "I just came over to talk. It's so deadly dull doing nothing."

"Change places with Margaret Jardine for a couple of days," Fran suggested, turning her sun-helmet over and over. "You'd boil out all this surplus energy you're bragging about."

Hogmanay grinned.

"Ye're a great sympathizer o' Margaret's, aren't ye?"

"I am. And if I wore your size boots, she wouldn't stay in that old rattle-trap another minute."

"Eh?"

It was Catherine's turn to smile.

"For once, I think Fran's advice is sound," she said meaningly. "And I'd like you to invite Margaret to Sunday dinner with us."

Hogmanay's color was a trifle high, but his calm, under the circumstance, was tremendous.

"That's kind of involved. Hadn't ye better do the invitin' yoursel'?"

"We will. But we want to be sure it reaches her."

"What do ye mean? What's to stop——"

"Well," Fran explained, "Elsie and Tommy and I went over yesterday afternoon in the launch to take her for a run up-river, but she was too busy to bother with us. At least, that weird-looking father of hers said she was. Heavens! How that man can cuss!"

"And ye came away without seein' her?"

"We had to. It's his ship and he's the captain on it. He told us so from the companion ladder several times."

"I see."

Hogmanay searched for his pipe and filled it and did not hurry.

"Aye. He's a hard man to talk to. He is that."

Completing the pipe-filling process with a deliberation that was fascinating, he struck a match.

"There's no sayin' what that man is likely to do or to think. But ye mustn't mind him. No' a bit. Since ye've asked me—though it's no' my practise, mind ye, to interfere in other folks' family affairs, I'm afraid——"

"Oh, light it!" Fran exclaimed nervously.

MacGregor applied the lighted match to the pipe, puffed deeply and then concluded with ominous finality—

"I'm afraid I'll have to take it on mysel' to pay the enemy a call."

CHAPTER XIV

WITNESS PALAVER

IN HIS most pretentious canoe of state, that swung up from the Agwalatown creek with all the glamour of rhythm and color that he could inject into the performance, Agwala whirled alongside the *Bonny* to the accompaniment of a burst of pagan song, and the flash of forty stabbing paddles glinting in the sun.

At the foot of the companion ladder, however, his assumption of majesty was reduced, externally, to a mere exhibition of pelf and poundage. As Fran Goddard had remarked, he rolled up as well as down, and as he rolled, the Bond Street diamonds on his puffy fingers literally hurt Fran's eyes.

"They *are* getting woozy," she muttered to herself as she moved away from the rail.

When Agwala reached the deck and waddled toward the library where Malkett awaited him, it was at once clear that whatever civilized conceits the chief had borrowed from his white mentors, they had not altered the man within to any appreciable extent.

Though he did not squat in a loin-cloth before a chop pot and eat with his fingers, but sat at a table and used a knife and fork; though he composed his fat in the midst of silken cushions on a groaning wicker divan, and knew the difference between Benedictine and Chartreuse; though he wore a sweeping panama hat and clothed the upper half of him in a blazer of modest Oxford blue, he was still shrouded from his waist down in many trailing yards of gorgeous "real India," the number of his wives continued to require three figures, and about his massive neck, the red coral necklace, with the sacred and all-powerful, cloth-wrapped amulet in the center, was much in evidence.

Within that tightly bound covering of colored cloth was the symbol of the greatness of Agwala's fathers. Only Agwala knew what that talisman was, and it would remain a secret even when he died. It never left his neck and never would.

And though all the things that he treasured would probably be buried with him, and would make of his grave a miniature Eldorado, not even Ogulo-of-the-long-arms, who was already damned, would give a moment's thought to the ghoulish reward of its violation.

As usual, Agwala's broad, shiny, fat face, set with small, dull, black eyes, did not express pleasure or displeasure, confidence or diffidence, excitement or a too-inflated calm.

His joy and anger, his laughter and his grief had little effect upon his appearance at any time. When he laughed, his fat shook a little. When his wrath mounted, his eyes seemed to flatten. But that was all. Except in most unusual circumstances, there were few words. This, apparently, was not an unusual occasion.

"*Doh,*" he greeted Malkett, Jakri fashion, as he scuffed his way into the library, with a bare-legged, blue-uniformed Warri policeman acting as an escort.

"Sit down," Malkett invited, and waved him bruskly to a chair. "Bark and I went up there—" he jerked his hand in the direction of Grandison's beach—"but we couldn't see anything. What's matter?"

"You go dere with Yoruba man?"

"Of course not. We've got only your word for it. You no like Abado. You no like Charteris. We go shoot because you no like?"

Agwala shrugged his huge shoulders.

"If you no shoot, Cha't'ris sit down for Grandison beach long time, and Abado be all same shadow for him."

Malkett regarded the blotter in front of him a little while.

"Nothing in that," he decided. "What's matter you no catch Abado at Grandison's beach yourself?"

Agwala's smile was enough of an answer to that question, but he added generously:

"If I go dere with my boys, Cha't'ris man go fight. I no' want to fight Cha't'ris man. If I fight him and he go die, white man law says be me kill him. Dat no good."

And he shrugged his shoulders again most impressively to put a period on the whole business. Evidently, although he was anxious to have the government bring a company or two of Yoruba soldiers to Benin River, he had no desire, personally, to cross swords with Charteris.

Half an hour later he was leaving the yacht and Catherine was trying to make Malkett disclose the result of the interview in sentences of more than one syllable. The best she could get, however, was a bruskly mumbled announcement to the effect that—

"Parker'll be back tomorrow."

Catherine was glad of that and at tiffin she mentioned the fact casually to Fran and Elsie, and added meditatively—

"I wonder why the provincial commissioner is so sure of Charteris."

Elsie bridled at once.

"Aren't you?"

"Elsie has reached the stage where she takes it as a personal affront if one questions whether the mop man brushes his teeth as often as he should," Fran explained unnecessarily to Catherine. "And you lie awake at night praying that Agwala is a liar. Shut up, both of you, and let me enjoy my tea. I'm sure Tommy wants to second the motion, but he hasn't the nerve to admit that he's as sick of the Charteris cult as I am."

Tommy muttered something incoherent, and Catherine laughed rather absently. So Fran added for good measure:

"Fact is, Charteris doesn't give a rap whether you think he's respectable or not. And I'm perfectly certain Agwala's telling the truth."

Elsie gaped, but Catherine asked quietly—

"Why?"

"Because it's just the sort of thing he would do."

"He would not!" Elsie protested hotly. "He wouldn't protect the man who killed my father!"

Catherine's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, but she had no further remarks to make on the subject.

MARGARET JARDINE had no time for tiffin.

The companionway to the little shop saloon was jammed with shiny loin-clothed bodies that milled and sweated and grunted like cattle. Even the skylight overhead was black with impatient bushel traders whose raucous screeching loosed a deafening pandemonium.

Margaret's Jakri shop boys, assisted by two Kroo-boys, were working with valiant and violent energy to keep the shop as free as possible of all save those who were at that moment "taking pay."

But again and again, excited up-river bushmen, who were a long way from home, ducked under the rope barrier or stepped over it, and thrust their "books"at Margaret, jabbering the tale of their haste the while.

Presently, Margaret found it difficult to distinguish the difference between a dozen heads of tobacco and a piece of a certain dark print cloth. Also, she knew that things were being stolen and that the management of the situation was swiftly passing into hands other than her own.

Somehow or other, with only a vague understanding of the fact that the shop had been cleared and the doors locked, she was standing on the hulk's bridge, gripping the rail tightly and looking down at her father and the dark brown mob that swayed around him on the deck below.

"My head's buzzing," she said to no one who could possibly have heard. "And I wish you'd all go to the —— —at least for a little while."

Then she heard her father's voice droning on and on, and there were two glass marbles sticking away out of his head, one on each side of his nose. Of course, she knew they were his eyes, but they looked more like glass marbles then than ever, almost as if they would roll down his cheeks any minute if he kept jerking his head back and forth the way he was doing.

"I'm tired," she said to him and to the faces about him when his lips stopped moving; and though she could not hear the sound of her own voice, she said the rest of the words for all that. "The smells make me sick and I can't keep those thieves from stealing when I get to the swimmy stage. Then I know it's time I shut up shop. So I shut it up and—I think I'll sit down."

She sat down on a camp chair which occupied a permanent place on the bridge, but she continued to hang on to the rail, while a gray blackness that was dotted with the whites of eyes swam round about her in a most exasperatingly leizurely fashion.

Then, her father was gripping her arm. She could scarcely see him, but she knew the hard bony quality of his fingers.

"What's the matter with you?"

There was nothing tenderly solicitous about the inquiry.

"I'm dizzy. Please go away."

"You're crazy, that's what! All them books to be paid and all that trade waiting to be heaved up and you've got to get squeamish about a little heat an' a little smell. You ain't half my age and——"

"Go away!" Margaret wrenched her arm free and staggered to her feet. "Get off the bridge! Get off!"

"Eh? Who—I'm captain aboard this ship and if you ain't satisfied——"

"Get off, or I'll have you thrown off!"

Jardine screeched in his rage, then he whined, then cursed the name of woman till his breath gave out. But he got off the bridge, and Margaret stayed, hanging dimly on to the rail.

After a while Noni was at her right elbow and some one who spoke English perfectly—almost too perfectly—was at her left.

"You had better go to your cabin, Miss Jardine," Arthur Garriman Bark said smoothly. "You are a little faint and if you were to allow your head to rest on a somewhat lower level than—that is—your nether extremities, I am quite sure——"

"You here again? Or is this yesterday? I'm getting mixed."

"You go down now, Missy Cap'n, sah?" Noni asked simply.

Margaret thought she would. Evidently people would not leave her alone if she remained on the bridge. So, with Bark's and Noni's aid, though she denied the necessity for it, she reached the box-like deck cabins that had been built by the late Captain Ed Jardine for the benefit of his assistants and himself, and, lurching into her own, closed the door behind her. The dark came down without any effort after that.

* * *

WHEN Margaret discovered that she was lying in her cabin, she knew also that the mumble of voices came from somewhere outside her door. They were Jakri voices, and yet they were soft—almost sympathetic. This in itself was suspicious.

It had grown dark outside and the screaming babble of trade had died away. In the shelter of the bush, however, there were canoes laden with kernels and oil, waiting for business to resume in the morning, and occasionally Margaret could hear the dull, monotoned evidence of their existence.

She was just a little ashamed of herself. Her exhibition of weakness seemed to her rather pitiful than otherwise, and she had no sympathy for it or for herself.

When she rose and found the deck more or less firmly under her feet, she went about the task of resuming life where she had momentarily left off without a second thought for trembling knees and somewhat uncertain hands. That would pass. She knew she had no fever. True, her color was somewhat anemic, but——

She stepped out on deck and stopped ere she had gone three paces. One of the voices she knew belonged to Noni. The other was that of Arthur Garriman Bark. They were hardly more than two yards distant from Margaret's cabin when she saw them. Evidently they had not suspected that she would recover quite so quickly. Whatever it was they had to say to each other, it seemed to be necessary to say it at close quarters.

Noni's cheek was nuzzling Bark's shoulder, her large, soft brown eyes, so childlike in the confidence they expressed, were looking up into his face, and even in the dark there was no misunderstanding the amorous intentions of Arthur. Without any doubt, he was agreeably combining business with pleasure.

"Noni," Margaret called evenly, and the haste with which Bark drew away from the girl made Margaret reasonably certain that Noni's share of the responsibility for so obvious a dénouement was larger than his.

Arthur sputtered hopelessly, as if he had been hypnotized and had been suddenly wakened up, while Noni's naked little feet carried her to her mistress's side without faltering in the least.

"I here, Missy Cap'n. You besser li'l bit?"

There was no excitement in her voice, nor even a trace of embarrassment in her manner.

"Yes. I'm all right. Fetch my bath water."

"Yes, Missy Cap'n, sah. I do um one time. Bark go 'way, now. We talk marry palaver, li'l bit."

"Marriage? Is Bark going to marry you?"

"Be so he talk. Maybe so, I 'gree. I no savez. Marry palaver be big money palaver. I go for bass water, one time."

And having thus indicated that the only barrier to her marriage with Bark was the question of the marriage price, Noni swayed leisurely off into the dark toward the galley, leaving Arthur to extricate himself the best he could.

"Is that why you've been coming here every day?" Margaret asked pointedly.

"I—Miss Jardine—I beg leave to protest the assertion the—er—the girl has just made!" Bark managed desperately. "I—marriage—I had not considered it for a moment. The girl—our principal witness against Abado—she has misrepresented the facts and I——"

"In other words, you were just fooling your time away?"

"No, Miss Jardine, not at all. I—it is most difficult to explain. Noni—the—er—the girl is our principal witness and we are assured that she is in communication with her father, and, of course—" Bark grinned as mirthlessly as a death's head. "I—that is, I am glad, Miss Jardine, to see you fully recovered."

"Thanks."

"Our principal witness—I mean, I waited to be sure that I could report to your friends on the *Bonny* that——"

"Don't say anything about it to them," Margaret interrupted shortly. "Understand?"

"Perfectly, Miss Jardine, perfectly. I assure you again it is a pleasure and a relief to know that you are none the worse for your most unpleasant experience."

"All right. Good night."

Arthur did not hesitate. He departed from the hulk in the canoe that had brought him there, and Noni, watching him from the rail in the vicinity of the galley, laughed soundlessly down upon him.

A moment later, however, she shivered slightly.

It was not good, on the Benin River, to make the servants of Agwala food for the white man's laughter.

AT DINNER that evening, Captain Bart Jardine was in the throes of a period of silence. These periods were rare, but when one of them arrived, it was indubitably profound.

Margaret did not encourage him to talk, and she was not in the least offended because he did not inquire after the state of her health. She had appeared at table simply to indicate that she had fully recovered, and though, every so often, her father looked at her rather queerly, the silence continued unbroken to the end of the meal.

After which, he retired solemnly to the nightly duty of indenting for new cargo, and Margaret repaired to the shop to make inventory of the items to be replenished from the cargo hold next morning.

She was assisted by Noni, who appeared to have forgotten that Arthur Garriman Bark existed, and devoted herself with a fair show of industry to the business of multiplying by five or ten.

However, while Noni caressed a flaring red and yellow silk handkerchief that hung on a wire immediately above the vermillion perfumery she was supposed to be counting, Margaret leaned on a fast-diminishing pile of mosquito-bar cloth and considered the girl attentively.

"Bark say you lie," she remarked finally. "He say marry palaver be foolish talk."

Noni stopped fingering the silk handkerchief as though she had been caught in the act of stealing it. In a moment, however, her appearance of ingenuousness returned to her. Tightening the twist-knot in her overcloth in a manner that gave her a subtle, indefinable suggestion of modesty and propriety, she straightened and admitted with disarming frankness:

"Bark, he make me fool. Me, I make him fool."

Margaret did not smile. She had no desire to interfere with Noni's love affairs, but there was altogether too much mystery hovering over the hulk these days for Margaret to have much patience with Noni's contribution to it. The trade situation had changed so weirdly that she felt uncomfortably akin to a receiver of stolen goods.

Charteris had not returned since he had come to discuss the sale of the thirty puncheons, but she was reasonably sure that he was responsible for it all. And when she had learned from the head shop-boy, who, at her instigation, had made it his business to learn it from some one else, that the momentous thirty puncheons had belonged to Abado, she had taken the precaution to pray that there was nothing dishonest in Charteris' uncanny method of securing results.

"What's matter, then, Bark come here every day?" she asked abruptly.

"Be witness palaver," Noni answered smoothly. "He t'ink I savez plenty thing and I no talk."

"You savez which place Abado live?"

"I no savez," Noni lied simply.

"Charteris man be your father friend?"

"I no savez. Gray man by *ju-ju.* I be so-so li'l girl. I fear *ju-ju* man too much."

Margaret did not believe that, but any further questions she might have asked were stopped by a descending footstep on the saloon companion.

MacGregor's large figure projected itself into the light of the moth-encircled lamp without any apology.

"Hello, Margaret. How are ye? Your watch-boy said I'd find ye down here, and I thought maybe I could take ye up-river a bit in my gig."

Margaret's cheeks became faintly tinged with life as she murmured something about being busy.

"And I'm afraid Dad wouldn't like it," she added with a slight smile. "He'd be very talkative if he caught you down here."

"Then we'll go up on deck," Hogmanay suggested placidly, mopping his forehead. "This is no' a shop. It's a boiler-room. Come on. I want to have a real serious talk wi' ye."

"That sounds like a threat, and I would rather listen to some music."

As she looked around the shop-saloon appraisingly, Hogmanay was not slow in observing that her cheerfulness did not conceal the heaviness about her eyes.

"I'm agreeable to anything that takes ye out o' this fryin'-pan for a while," he conceded, and Margaret, without much reluctance, gave Noni her freedom, locked the shop and passed up on deck.

At the top of the companion ladder she said to Hogmanay whisperingly.

"Wait a minute, please. I'll tell Dad I'm going. He would only make it desperately unpleasant for the watch-boy if I didn't."

Hogmanay nodded rather dubiously, and Margaret tiptoed aft toward the deck cabins.

IN ONE of these a light burned, and when Margeret reached the screen door, she did not open it.

"I'm going over to——"

She opened the screen door quickly and went in, shaking her father by the shoulder.

"Dad! What is it? What's wrong? Dad!"

Captain Bart Jardine's head had fallen forward on his small writing-desk and his arms hung limply down so that the tips of his fingers almost touched the deck.

"Dad!"

Margaret lifted his head sharply, and as she did so, she saw the square-faced bottle of trade gin that stood on the adjacent washstand.

She looked into her father's face and then, picking up the empty bottle, she slipped quietly out to the rail and dropped it overboard. Softly calling Gola, the chief steward, she assisted him to place her father in his bunk.

"Cap'n tired too much," she said by way of explanation, which did not fool Gola in the least. "Lef' him sleep. Tomorrow-time he be all right."

Then she blew out the light and, after a minute or so, in which her handkerchief became a surreptitious necessity, she joined Hogmanay again.

"Dad's degenerating," she said with the tips of her fingers resting on MacGregor's sleeve. "He had no objection to make. So I think I'll remain at home. Do you mind if we just stay here and talk?"

Hogmanay tried to get at the real truth by searching her face more closely.

"What kept ye so long?"

"Dad's time-worn prejudice against trade gin," Margaret answered easily. "I'm beginning to think he's just a little crazy on the subject."

CHAPTER XV

THE BOOK O' REVELATIONS

"YE HAVEN'T been over my way in a long time," Hogmanay began, when they had found chairs in the shadows aft the saloon. "Of course, ye've been very busy. I could see that."

"Yes. Haven't we? Our last shipment of oil was almost as big as yours."

"Maybe bigger. But I didn't risk the wrath o' an indignant parent to come here and talk trade."

"No?"

"No. I've brought ye an invitation to dinner—" Hogmanay paused, produced a *chit* signed by Catherine and countersigned by Elsie and Fran and Tommy Dillingworth—"and I want to tell ye something Miss Goddard—she's an outspoken body—said to me the day."

Margaret carried the invitation to the light, read it, laughed, and sat down again.

"All right. The invitation is hungrily accepted." Then in mock anxiety. "It won't be chicken, will it?"

"I'll have a quiet talk wi' the *Bonny's* cook," Hogmanay promised. "What would ye like?"

"They haven't got it," Margaret declared emphatically. "But so long as it isn't chicken — Well, what did Fran Goddard say?"

"She said—" Hogmanay made a ponderously nonchalant job of it—"that if she wore my size in boots you wouldn't be allowed to stay here another minute."

Margaret's laughter was just a little hysterical, and Hogmanay, in spite of his desperate effort to be matter-of-fact, was assuming the complexion of a beet. He took his pipe out of his pocket and put it back again; looked out into the blackness beyond the rail and into the dark corners round about as if he expected to find an eavesdropper in all of them.

"What led Fran to make a statement like that?" Margaret asked and tried to be nonchalant, too.

"Well, now—ye see, Margaret—it's this way. Have ye ever noticed Tommy Dillingworth especially?"

"Why Tommy Dillingworth?"

Margaret's hands were held tightly in her lap, because it was going to be harder than usual to have to say, "No" to what MacGregor was so laboriously trying to ask.

"Tommy is a young man wi' a gift I'd like to have this minute," Hogmanay said carefully. "He can speak volumes, as the sayin' goes, without utterin' a word, and not look like a calf when he's doin' it. If he were me, there'd be no need for talking about it except maybe to suggest—" Hogmanay found himself floundering to his feet—"to suggest that the Great Dane is allowed to say the words that—that'd make us man and wife."

It was a big moment in Hogmanay's life; a triumphant moment. But he did not feel it as such. Towering over Margaret and looking everywhere but at her, he felt painfully out of place.

Somewhere forward a Kroo-boy was humming plaintively to himself and the uneven scuff of the watch-boy's feet on deck came and went with irritating irregularity.

Margaret felt cold. Even her hands. At first, she could see the *Bonny's* lights and then they became hazy and distant. But there were no tears.

"I can't. It's no use. I couldn't leave him like that—not now."

Hogmanay wondered a little at the unnecessarily high pitch of her voice and laid his hand awkwardly on her head to quiet her. The result evidently surprized him.

"Ye—your hair's awful bonny to the touch, Margaret," he said rather throatily. "Aye, it is that. Just—just like a silk hanky."

MacGregor's accent was becoming as thick as his voice. And there was no response. So with a terrible effort he tried again.

"I'm no' much o' a hand at the richt thing to say, but maybe if ye'll just let me try to be guid to ye, I'll no' be so bad a pick after a'."

Margaret lifted her face and laughed; a falling sound with a far-off tinkling note in it that soon drifted away. There followed another silence as hollow as an empty calabash.

"Sit down, please," Margaret said suddenly in an amazingly even voice, just as the bosun on the cargo boat faintly struck three bells.

Still more faintly, the *Bonny* and Marsden's beach followed suit, and the watch-boy on the hulk struck four bells just to prove that he was attending to business. Hogmanay continued to stand. He was too excited to sit down.

"Please," Margaret insisted quietly. "You're too far away up there, particularly in the dark."

Hogmanay obeyed reluctantly.

"Ye're goin' to begin arguin' about it, I suppose?" he said with a hopelessness upon him.

"No. I can't. I'm just trying not to act like a hysterical schoolgirl, and am having a terrible time of it."

"Ye're a fine lassie, Margaret," Hogmanay offered thickly. "I'm awfu' proud o' ye."

He did not see Margaret biting her lips as she tried to go frantically on.

"I'm not going to blame it on the quinin or the stuffiness of a twelve hour day in that place you call a boiler-room. I hate the dirtiness and the heat and the hour-by-hour grinding monotony of it, but that isn't why—why I would like to let the Great Dane say the words. I want to belong to you and—are you terribly sorry I can't, Sandy?"

MacGregor gulped. She had never called him Sandy before.

"Sorry! Sorry's no' the word. It's not the place for ye, Margaret, and I was hopin' ye might be willin' to give it up. That's awfu' selfish, maybe, but——"

"I think it's delightful," Margaret said luxuriously. "We've been very foolish for a long, long time, you and I."

She reached forth a hand and caught one of his, and for a little while, the low hum of the Kroo-boy conversation in the fo'c'sle, the even swish of unseen paddle-blades and the ever-whispering tongues of the bush were the only sounds that disturbed the awed quiet of a darkness that was grateful to MacGregor.

Margaret's chair creaked along the deck just a little.

"You'll let me fight this thing out in my own way, won't you?" she asked at last. "I know I'm an awful fool, and if you went away tonight and never came back, it wouldn't be any more than I deserve. But I couldn't be happy, even with you, if I left him to go out alone."

"Ye're a fine lassie," Hogmanay muttered dazedly. "Aye. A grand lassie."

"I'm not. I'm an idiot. And I've always been an idiot. When my aunt used to take me into the parlor and deliver sermons to me—and no other room in the house was good enough for those but the parlor—I felt that I was a troublesome, ungrateful little devil for putting her to the necessity of thinking up all those big words for my benefit.

"Then I discovered she just pecked at me for practise, and delivered the same sermons to her bible class pupils, omitting the personal element. And I used to cry myself to sleep after some of them!"

Hogmanay patted her hand and she laughed.

"I've always been that way. Always desperately afraid I was going to hurt somebody's feelings, or had already done so, and always making excuses for the poeple who deliberately, with malice aforethought, stuck knives into me. And it isn't because I am so filled with the Christian spirit. It's simply because I haven't courage enough to hew out my own happiness in my own way.

"I'm a fake. You think I'm good and kind and patient and self-sacrificing, and I'm just a simpleton. I want to raise the dickens, and—and love and walk off the hulk with you this minute and never come back!"

"Come on, then. I'm willin'."

"And I haven't got the gumption to do it. I'm afraid. That's the simple truth, Sandy. It isn't goodness. If I had had the courage to forget some of the ten commandments, I'd probably have smashed them long ago."

To Margaret's surprize, Hogmanay chuckled, and his grip upon her hand tightened almost passionately.

"Aye. I ken. There's a lot o' folk in that boat. But ye're fine for a' that. And if I get any mair excited, I'll be talkin' like a drunken ghillie."

Margaret suddenly crushed the scar out of sight in the folds of MacGregor's shirt sleeve. And after a long pause, Hogmanay announced in a hoarse and hesitant whisper—

"I—I'd like to kiss ye, Margaret."

WHEN MacGregor returned to his own beach that night, the lateness of the hour was of no consequence. He sat on his veranda with his 'cello and played Elgar's "*Salut d'Amour*" so that even Garland, who was perspiringly making up the monthly shop sales, paused and listened and almost became sentimental.

Hogmanay followed it with "Down South," for which his most recently arrived assistant, who was chewing sullenly upon a cigar and dramatically endeavoring to forget that he had ever had a love affair, damned him in secret most earnestly.

Charteris, however, rather liked the second piece.

"Splendid!" he declared generously from the corner of the veranda. "The last time I heard 'Down South' was when Sousa played it at the Glasgow Exhibition."

Hogmanay blinked and put the 'cello slowly and carefully away from him. Charteris came into the light of the stand lamp without even a suggestion of diffidence or hesitation.

"I heard you fiddling as I went past and thought I'd like to enjoy it at shorter range. For a palm oil ruffian, you play very well."

Hogmanay reached his feet mechanically. Aside from the circumstance that Charteris' appearance was the last thing on earth he had expected to happen, the man's sublime impertinence fascinated him.

"Ye're an impident ——!" he said frankly, and in spite of himself a queer warmth coursed all through him as he looked speculatively at his visitor. "Or is it that ye think I am such a fushionless, inconsequential man that ye don't take any stock o' me?"

Charteris threw his battered panama into a chair and laughed.

"On the contrary, I am firmly of the opinion that you can make more of a nuisance of yourself than Malkett and Bark and Agwala put together. But before we go into that, may I have the honor of being the first to offer my congratulations?"

MacGregor's jaw sagged a little.

"What are ye bletherin' about now?"

"Miss Jardine is a splendid girl," Charteris said, and appeared to mean every word of it. "And I am only too happy to have the opportunity to wish you luck. In fact, I think a small bottle——"

Hogmanay pulled at his beard jerkily to cover his amazement. In his own words, he was "fair bumbaized," but with that characteristic pride of place, which he was always at no small pains to conceal, he lifted himself bodily to meet the occasion—

"Boy!"

There was no waver in Hogmanay's voice.

Even on the *Bonny*, where Tommy Dillingworth was saying a lengthy good night to Elsie and Fran Goddard was assuring

Catherine that the "mop man" was not intended to be taken seriously, the import of that yell was distinct and unmistakeable.

"Sounds like an invitation," Tommy said. "Wonder if I could induce Walton to go over with me and keep Mac awake."

Elsie declared against Tommy's inclination to "prowl around at that time of night"; but, in any case, Hogmanay felt that he needed no aids to wakefulness, just then. He had never been less inclined to sleep, and when he had ordered the prescribed "small bottle", from one of his sleepy Kroo-boy stewards, he said to Charteris broadly—

"Ye have your own way o' finding out things, I don't doubt, but what I'm most concerned with is the real object o' your honorable presence on my veranda at this hour o' th' night?"

Charteris had dropped into the chair where he had flung his hat. There was no visible artificiality in his manner, but it was none the less disconcerting.

"I'm here partly because I want to be and greatly to talk things over," he returned placidly. "Frankly, I detest mystery and espionage and all their attendant evils and dangers and inconveniences, and your confounded spies or trade-scouts or whatever they are called, are scattered all over the shop. A man can't stir without tripping over one or two of them."

MacGregor laughed in throaty derision.

"Ye're a convincing talker," he admitted. "But if ye've come up here to make faces at me—well, here's the fizzy drink. We'll do it the honor of our whole attention, if ye don't mind."

Apparently Charteris had no objection. When the champagne glasses had been filled, he lifted his and without any exaggerated flourishes, proposed a simple toast to Margaret's health and happiness.

And when he dropped and smashed the glass, thereby honoring Margaret as, upon occasion, "the King" is honored, Hogmanay, who solemnly followed suit, had an odd impression that the "queer devil" was as old and respectable as his hair after all.

MacGregor kicked the bits of broken glass from under his feet and called the steward to sweep them up.

There was no handshaking; no platitudes. Charteris produced his gun-metal cigaret case and MacGregor his pipe, and for a minute or two after the steward had gone, it seemed as if neither wished to resume the subject of their differences.

"As I was sayin'," Hogmanay spoke heavily at last, "if ye've come up here to make faces at me, ye've made a mistake in your man. Ye're interfering with the firm's business—with Marsden & Co.—and I've got to put an end to that. In other words, you and I have got to understand each other."

"Exactly," Charteris agreed and sat up a little. "That's the reason I'm just a little curious why you haven't tried to nail Abado."

Hogmanay's eyebrows lifted and fell and he hesitated, studying the other man and his somewhat amazing frankness with cold suspicion. Then, taking a leaf out of Charteris' book, he asked bluntly—

"How do ye know I haven't?"

"Because the members of your really admirable intelligence department have made no effort to give him away in spite of the fact that I am quite sure they know where he is."

"Ye're too complimentary," Hogmanay said dryly, then added, after a short pause. "But I haven't been much interested in Abado—lately."

"No? Why not?"

"That's my business. But I'll tell ye this much. Ye're a queer stick and I'll be —— if I think ye're any friend o' mine; but I'm not ready just yet to think o' you as an accessory to Hugh Morrison's murder. And that's that."

"Thanks. I appreciate——"

"Och, I don't give tuppence for your appreciation. And I'm much more interested in Abado's trade than I am in him or you or all this mysteriousness that's going on. But since ye seem to like impertinent questions, I'll ask ye one.

"Yes? What is it?"

Hogmanay leaned forward and said in a low, cautious voice—

"Doridi?"

Charteris' eyes betrayed nothing at all; not even the fact that he knew MacGregor was only bluffing.

"What about him?"

"That's what I'm askin' you. What have ye done wi' him?"

Charteris laughed.

"He is the fellow who was so free with his information to Miss Jardine's maid, wasn't he?"

"Aye. What are ye hidin' him for?"

"Hphm! This is interesting. Particularly since your information is somewhat twisted. As a matter of fact, that young man's disappearance has been rather puzzling."

Hogmanay said nothing for several minutes; just sat perfectly still and looked Charteris through and through as if he were determined to make the test a final one.

Charteris scarcely moved. His indifference to the exacting scrutiny, in spite of the incessant hum of the mosquitoes about his ears was, in every respect, a finished performance.

"Hugh Morrison wasn't just my employer," MacGregor said at last in heavy emphasis. "He was also a frien' o' mine and a good one. And if I ever catch the man that killed him, I'll be sore tempted to hang him with my own hands. Ye understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Mind ye," Hogmanay continued pointedly, "this is no' a threat. But I'm not sayin' it couldn't be interpreted as a hint to outsiders to mind their own business."

Charteris smiled.

"I really don't know where Doridi is," he said so convincingly that Hogmanay almost believed him.

"Hunh! And I suppose ye're just as ignorant o' what's happenin' to Abado's oil and all that uncanny lookin' Igabo and bush Sobo trade ye're enticin' down here?"

Charteris' glance strayed to the light at the head of the *Bonny's* companion ladder, and he ignored the question completely. Hogmanay snorted.

"Did it ever occur to ye that ye've got a —— of a lot o' cheek? What'll ye do if I tell Malkett or Parker on ye?"

"Nothing. I came up here perfectly willing to go to jail if you insisted upon it."

"Ye did, eh? Then ye'll bear watchin'."

Hogmanay paused then added cannily:

"But ye haven't answered my question yet. What's your object in interferin' with Marsden & Co's business?"

"Am I?"

"Och! Don't annoy me with your footerin' evasions!" Hogmanay exploded. "Do ye think I'm daft? Or in my dotage?"

Charteris threw his cigaret over the veranda rail.

"You know, of course, that Agwala has been selling to the Siluko and Koratown independents at very high prices?" he asked and his manner had suddenly and startlingly become frankly cooperative.

"Aye," suspiciously. "I know that."

"And that he's been taking vouchers that are virtually four to six months notes in payment?"

"Just that. He's gettin' to be an expert on the subject o' credit. He's had diamond fits and cushion fits and fits o' Canary Island furniture. Now, it's credit. And what of it?"

"Simply that notes or currency are no good in the native markets. Cloth, gin, rice, salt, silks and so forth, are the things the oil and kernel gatherers want for their produce."

"Aye. Go on."

"Abado and the rest are selling to the independents at somewhat lower prices and getting the stuff to barter with," Charteris concluded with amazing ingenuousness. "All of it."

"Hunh!" MacGregor grunted. "But what's to hinder Agwala comin' to me, or goin' to any of our other branches in Warri or Sapeli, and gettin' all the barter goods he wants?"

"Nothing in the world. He's doing about half of his business with you now, just to keep him supplied in these bartering commodities, so that he can buy oil and kernels at the native markets to sell in turn to your competitors, the independents, at higher prices on a credit basis."

"I'm also aware o' that," MacGregor growled.

"And I thought it might be quite a trick to make Agwala pay for the privilege of using Marsden & Co. as a convenience—as a kind of warehouse."

"Eh? What's that?" Hogmanay sat up straight.

"Because when Siluko and Koratown re-sell at home all the oil and kernels Agwala has been selling to them on credit," Charteris continued simply and implacably, "they will have money to do things with. And these things will be done principally to Marsden & Co."

"Your discourse is vera interestin'."

"And when the independents begin to pay their debts, in goods, to Agwala, about six months hence, he will be in a position to gain control of several more native markets than he does now, and consequently, to charge you still more for the privilege of being his warehouseman."

MacGregor resented the designation, but he had no difficulty in absorbing the fact. His bushy eyebrows lowered, and he nodded slowly.

"Aye. I get your drift. He's puttin' our competitors on their legs again at our expense, as it were, and gettin' ready to raise prices on both of us at the same time. Aye," sourly, "just that."

It was, in truth, a more subtle amplification of what Agwala had threatened he would do, if Abado were not boycotted. Hogmanay did not admit this to Charteris, however. Instead, he now regarded him with open suspicion.

"I'm afraid I don't appreciate ye at your full value," he commented dryly. "What's your object—your ultimate object—in bein' so instructive?"

"You said it was time we understood each other, and I thought my view of the trading situation might be interesting."

Hogmanay nodded slowly.

"Och, I'll admit it's interestin'," he said without enthusiasm. "So is the 'Book o' Revelations'. But it's needed an awful lot o' explainin'."

Charteris smiled.

"I thought you'd be trader enough to take the hint."

"I am."

"Then we understand each other perfectly," Charteris concluded and rose as if he were satisfied to have the interview end there.

"Maybe ye think we do," said Hogmanay heavily. "But I'm no' so sure. What's on your mind? Out with it, man, out with it!"

With a laugh, Charteris swung suddenly toward the stairs.

"My head's as empty as Agwala's promises," he said significantly. "But I do hope you'll tell Miss Jardine that I lost no time in wishing her luck. Good night."

And Hogmanay found that he was alone with an interrogation point for company.

When Charteris reached Marsden & Co.'s concrete breakwater, a small, female voice came cautiously out of the murk to meet him.

"You look him?"

"I look him. We talk big palaver long time."

Noni knew how long it was.

"He go marry Missy Cap'n?" she asked as eagerly as any match-making dowager, as she perched herself on the tail of Charteris's canoe.

But he did not choose to discuss Margaret's "marry palaver" with her, even though he had found the girl's questionably gained and gratuitously offered information on the matter both timely and helpful.

Presently, however, he took the opportunity to ask.

"Noni, when you make Bark look all same fool, you no sorry li'l bit?"

The girl's dark eyes expanded furiously.

"Them day I kill him, I glad too much!" she prophesied with savage emphasis.

"I think you lie," Charteris accused calmly without turning his head.

"*Cha!* I no lie! I go kill him! I go cut him head ten—twenty time!"

Nevertheless, Charteris did not believe her. But, when he had seen her safely aboard the hulk, and was making his leisurely way up river again, he thought she would be able to hate Arthur effectively enough until it was no longer necessary.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WOMAN OF IT

ON SUNDAY forenoon, when Daniel Dane Parker stepped on board the *Bonny*, among the last things he appeared to be thinking about was the possibility that the fugitive Abado might be found at Grandison's beach.

He had had a short conversation with Malkett, mumbled a few words to Bark, who seemed nervous and preoccupied, then made himself perfectly comfortable in a deck chair and indulged himself in the luxury of being entertained by Elsie and Fran.

Catherine, who did not like his mood, sat on the sidelines and surveyed him with a minuteness that would have made him feel most uncomfortable had he known anything about it.

She came to the several conclusions that she liked his laugh, his forehead, the brown breadth of his hands, the driving force that was behind his shoulders and the obvious resistance that was in the strong column of his neck. But his eyes bothered her, possibly because they said nothing she had expected them to say.

After luncheon, he went off alone in his own launch, visited Marsden's beach and conversed with Hogmanay for upward of an hour.

MacGregor said nothing about Charteris' visit of the previous evening, and certainly did not explain a small piece of broken glass the Great Dane happened to crunch under his heavy soled tramping boots.

They talked trade and good liquor and exchanged a story or two in the most casual fashion, and then Parker asked as if he had just happened to think of it—

"That fellow Doridi hasn't been on your beach lately, has he?"

"No," slowly. "Are ye lookin' for him?"

"We'd like to check up the girl's story," Parker said indifferently, then leaned forward rather sharply. "There's rather more than usual in this case, Mac, that doesn't meet the eye."

"Charteris, for instance?"

Parker nodded.

"Of course, we could bring a company of the Waffs around here to keep you thieves and murderers in order and tear up Grandison's old place in fine style, but I hate like the —— to use good ammunition to shoot Agwala's chestnuts out of the fire."

Hogmany's eyebrows lifted in mock surprize.

"How do ye know they're there to shoot?"

Parker examined his bootlaces minutely.

"And with all these women in the river a rumpus of that sort would be indelicate. Why don't you send them home?"

"Me?"

"Of course. They're your womenfolk. And they are so —— inquisitive."

Hogmanay grinned.

"Are they all that's stoppin' you from shootin'?"

The Great Dane rose abruptly.

"Let's go up and have a talk with Charteris."

"Fine."

Catherine saw the launch leave Marsden's wharf and followed it with her eyes every inch of the way to Grandison's beach.

"Fran! They're going up there! Oh, I wish——"

The wish trailed off into nothingness, and Fran kept to her deck-chair and the shade and ignored it in any case.

Occasionally she put her hands across her eyes and squeezed them, and every little while, she went down to her cabin and surreptitiously bathed them and looked at herself steadily in the mirror to be sure it was just the sun.

No one appeared to observe how shrinkingly afraid Fran had become of the blinding glare of it.

Catherine saw Parker's launch arrive at Grandison's beach, and stood leaning upon the *Bonny's* rail waiting for it to return.

Parker found nothing but Ogulo, the dwarf, who was discovered cowering in the old kernel store. The stunted black was shivering with fear and played the part that had been assigned to him more naturally than he cared to.

"Where's Charteris?" Parker demanded.

"He done go, sah. Maybe so, he come back. I no savez."

"Where he go?"

"I no savez, sah. I be small boy. He no tell me which place he go, or which time he come. I fear gray man, sah. He be *ju-ju*, and I be poor Jakri man——"

"You're a glorious liar," Parker conceded calmly. "Which place I look you before?"

"He's one of Oagadi's boys—Ogulo," Hogmanay broke in. "From Akwanna. You remember Oagadi, don't ye?"

"Of course. Died about five or six years ago, didn't he? As cool and devilish an old reprobate as ever escaped the rope. What's his nibs doing here?"

"Oh, I expect Charteris brought Ogulo with him. They make a grand pair, don't they?"

Parker studied the dwarf intimately.

"You be Oagadi son?" he asked sharply.

Ogulo nodded and his knees sagged. His fear of the white man's laws was an awful thing.

"What's matter you live in this place?"

"I run 'way. My fadder angry," Ogulo answered truthfully enough.

"Your father dead long time!" Parker exclaimed. "What's matter you say he angry?"

"I talk true, sah. Before my father done die, I take 'nother man wife. Be my father frien'. He angry too much."

As a matter of fact, Ogulo had done nothing of the sort. He had run away to escape the penalty for his failure to execute his father's orders in the matter of the desired death of a certain young Jakri named Benniba-Atba.

In the affray with Benniba, Ogulo's father had lost several sons and had himself received a mortal injury; all because Ogulo-of-the-long-arms had been unable to arrive upon the scene on time. Therefore, the dwarf had never gone back to Akwanna; not even when his father had died.

Of his own accord, he had become an outcast, and having skulked through the bush for many years, vainly seeking refuge and honor among many peoples from the Benin country to the land of the Kwa, he had, like any Ishmael, returned to the home of his fathers, or as near to it as he dared.

Grandison's beach had offered him a haven and before Charteris had arrived there, Ogulo had taken pleasure in being the ghost that was believed by many of the natives to have made the place its own.

At the back of the beach, at the entrance to the path that led to the village of Dowadda, Ogulo had found, at fairly regular intervals, offerings of yams and plantains and palm wine, and even a fowl or two. Since he was a ghost of ravenous appetite, it was hoped his hunger would be appeased in this way and he would leave the village in peace.

Charteris had changed all that, as he had changed the whole face of the river; and the thoughts that ran wild in the minds of men.

"I think your woman talk is lie talk," Parker said after a moment's reflection. "Which place the woman live?"

"She live—she live in her mother house."

"Where's that? At the bottom of Saganna water in the belly of a crocodile?"

The whites of the dwarf's eyes rolled so that they looked like the eyes of a catfish. The sacred crocodile pool of sacrifice at Saganna, was, in truth, the great mother of many women who had been induced by the doctors and priests of the Jakri country to cure their barrenness by swimming across it. Some of them had actually reached the other side, but the wife of Ogulo the dwarf had not been one of them. White men, however, were not supposed to know of these things.

"Be Jakri man say she go have plenty son," he hastened to say in his own defense. "No be me tell her. Me, I be poor Jakri man. I no savez nothing."

Parker threw his head back and laughed, then nudged Hogmanay with his elbow.

"Come on, Mac. No use taking him along as extra baggage. And I suppose Charteris will be down at the yacht this evening to apologize for not being at home when we called."

On the tumbledown gig-wharf, Parker halted and looked back. Grandison's beach was the last word in desolation, and there was not a sign of life in the bush that bounded it upon three sides.

"If ye're as sure about it as all that," Hogmanay suggested suggestively, "why don't ye nab Charteris himsel' when he comes back?"

Parker's grin was the kind Catherine liked.

"Because I shouldn't know what on earth to do with him if I did."

"And ye have a notion he's maybe a help instead o' a hindrance?" MacGregor hinted shrewdly.

Parker made no response to MacGregor's innuendo. He was just a little afraid that his reply would have to be in the affirmative, if he told the truth. And if such proved actually to be the case, the result, contrarily enough, would be rifles and machine-guns.

AFTER dinner that evening, Margaret Jardine, who had not found a bit of chicken on any of the numerous plates that had been placed before her, sat with Fran and Hogmanay in the open glare of the *Bonny's* deck lights and tried to look perfectly at ease. Her color came and went something like an intermittent headlight, but her manner was very much less guilty than Hogmanay's.

He did not sit easily in his chair, and he was experiencing much the same sensations of his earlier days when the sermon was long and dry and the paper bag of "sweeties" in his pocket crackled enormously when he tried to secure one of the "mixtures" and sneak it, solemnly and surreptitiously, into his mouth.

Margaret and he had, of course, made no public announcement of their mutual understanding of the future, and Fran, who sat with her back to the light, pretended to look as if such an announcement were necessary.

Farther up the deck Malkett smoked one of Captain Walton's cigars and talked to him about salmon fishing and trout flies.

Elsie and Tommy Dillingworth, because the library was officially engaged, suffered the swelter of the saloon below, rather than be disturbed by the mosquitoes and sand flies. This was Tommy's idea. And Elsie, being in a soft and lonely humor—a humor that expressed a clinging fearfulness—Tommy came to the just conclusion, ere the evening was done, that life was really a wonderful thing if you knew how to arrange it properly.

In the shadow of a deck house, Noni, who had accompanied her mistress as usual, regarded MacGregor and his methods with scorn. Arthur Garriman Bark discovered her there and enticed her into the deeper shadows that ruled aft.

Arthur was very quiet about it. He had to be and he did not upbraid Noni for her deceit in the matter of the "marry palaver." On the contrary, he assured her that he had come to the conclusion that it would be a most excellent arrangement if her father were not Abado.

The identity of her male parent made the situation rather difficult. There was no one to whom he could pay the marriage price—no one save Abado—and obviously he could not pay it to him.

Noni drew her cloth tighter about her sinuous little body and compelled Bark to follow her, hither and thither among the shadows, one step at a time. Occasionally, she stood quite near to him; so near that Arthur almost believed what he said, and near enough for Noni to discover the exact location of his heart. Noni thought that when the time came it would be very simple.

If his polished leather leggings, in which she could see her face when the sun was up, and his white man's boots and his white man's uniform with the glistening buttons down the front of it—if all these things were not, it would be still more simple.

So she suddenly flung away from him angrily and used lamentable words to express her opinion of his utter worthlessness as a Jakri and his meager pretense of being white.

But, a minute later, a round, brown arm was again sliding softly about his neck and she was gently rubbing her cheek against the silver buttons on his tunic.

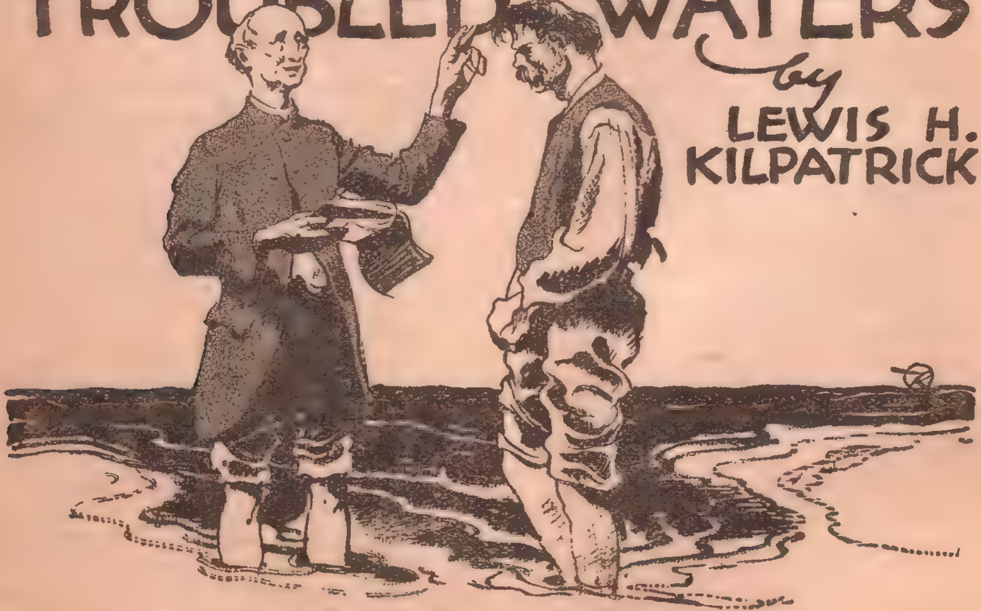
If only her sons, when they were men, could wear a uniform like that——

TO BE CONTINUED

TROUBLED WATERS

by

LEWIS H. KILPATRICK



Author of "The Littlest Cuss," "The Evidence of Dreams," etc.

SHERIFFS CLINT HAWKINS and Tom Salyers, standing on opposite banks of Red River and in their respective counties, glowered across the boundary at each other with an animosity developed by years of official rivalry and brought to a climax by the present tensely delicate situation.

The river was barely a hundred feet wide at this point; midway of it, between the two Kentucky sheriffs, floated a log raft; and squatting calmly thereon was a stoop-shouldered, unshaven man, a fishing-pole in his hand and a rifle leaning against his knee. Stacked behind him was a quantity of driftwood; near by, a gaudy handmade quilt, a skillet, a bundle of food and a few flat rocks. The raft was secured by a chain to a pile driven into a sand-bar, which cleft the flood several yards above, but beneath and around it swirled treacherous waters whose depth no living human had ever plumbed.

Early morning mists crawled along the twisting current, sending up a streamer here and there to connect with the heavier dew clouds that blanketed the flanking mountain walls, cutting their forested sides into strata and dimming the sun which was slowly burning its way up over the eastern summits. It was an isolated spot, with the nearest cabin a mile away; and the mountains, sloping steeply to the river, allowed only a narrow trail along either bank.

Clint Hawkins drew tighter his cartridge belt, from which hung a holstered brace of .38 specials, and spat into an eddy at his feet.

"Tom Salyers," he called, self-control smothering the fires of his anger, "I still hold that Sim there is in Menefee County and my lawful prisoner. I'm a-going to arrest him, like I sot out to, and I don't want you to interfere."

"Naw, you ain't." Sheriff Salyers' voice also was studiously controlled, but a .45 Winchester in the crook of his right arm lifted a trifle as he spoke. "The survey books I've read don't say that Red River's in your county. They tell in plain print that it jest bounds Menefee on the south. Now, a markin' that bounds a passel of land," he argued, "can't nowise in reason be a part of that land. That means the river don't belong to you all, don't it?"

"Then it ain't in Wolfe County, neither," Clint Hawkins retorted. "I've read them survey books too, and they 'low p'intedly that this fork bounds Wolfe on the north. Reasoning the same way you do," he concluded, "it's not in one county or the other, but just lays between 'em. It's Kaintucky's river here, I reckon by that, nobody else's. So who's got the right to arrest a feller that's hiding out on it?"

The question nonplused Tom Salyers for a moment; then he replied superiorly:

"Why, anybody, of course. The law says that a murderer can be took prisoner by even a common citizen, without a warrant. No matter where he's found in the hull State, he's liable to arrest by whosoever happens on him and can lock him up. I give the high sheriff of Menefee credit for knowing that much law, anyway," he added with a slight sneer.

The man on the raft paused in his fishing and grinned through his stubble of beard first at one officer, then the other.

"Wal, why don't ye come on out and git me?" he drawled. "This here turn-hole I'm sittin' over has mighty takin' ways. Bill Ginter was the last who tried to ford hit, ye recollect—and he and his mule liked the bottom so well they never riz up even oncet to tell whar hit was. But maybe yo' all and yer hosses will fare a leetle better, if ye splice a fishin'-cork to yer saddles."

He chuckled mockingly and again threw his line into the current.

Both sheriffs saw a much safer way than that he suggested to reach him. It was simply to wade out to the sand-bar with a few strong-armed assistants, lay hold of the anchoring chain and draw the raft in. But each hesitated for the same reason—the other.

They were matched in height, equally thewed, booted and slouch-hatted, and wore store-clothes that similar adventures of the past eighteen hours had studded with burs and splotched with mud. Clint Hawkins, however, was stoutly built, with a sandy mustache trailing between his aquiline nose and fighter's jaw, while Tom Salyers was grizzled and lean, his smooth-shaven features sharply chiseled.

They were proud, fearless men, born of the same rugged mountain stock, used to taking orders from none and ruling their respective counties like benevolent despots. Because of this similarity of temperament and because their bailiwicks adjoined, they frequently came into conflict. Each was jealous of his official reputation, each had friends and enemies who were not held as such in the other's esteem, and in seeking to protect or punish them accordingly, each officer sometimes had to reckon with his brother sheriff's power and resourcefulness.

Many a law-breaker, taking advantage of this well-known rivalry, sought Tom Salyers' favor by telling him of slanders uttered by Clint Hawkins, and in turn lies reached Clint Hawkins to the effect that Tom Salyers had said certain uncomplimentary things about him behind his back.

Thus was the fire of animosity fed, harmless enough while the two men kept apart, but full of dangerous possibilities when, as chanced now, they were brought face to face.

SIM CONLEY, with cunning foresight, gambled on this when he took refuge on the raft midway of the disputed boundary. Nor had he much choice in the matter. There came to his liquor-drugged ears word that the sheriffs and their posses were closing in on him from all sides; there was no gap in their lines through which he could escape and the odds were too great to tempt a stand-off fight. So, racing with the minutes, he had looted the nearest cabin of supplies, taken possession of the raft, used by that neighborhood in flood-times as a ferry, and fortified himself against immediate capture by anchoring over the whirlpool.

Having settled one point of law to their own satisfaction, at least, another arose between the two officers, who ignored Sim's sarcasm. Clint Hawkins, hands on hips, his feet wide apart, again opened the argument.

"You know mighty well, Mr. Sheriff," he recommenced, "that Sim Conley's got to be took to our jail-house one time or another. The killin' was done in this county and it's a case for the Menefee courts."

Tom Salyers stubbornly shook his gray head.

"Noble Martin was killed on this side," he maintained. "His own woman and children are witnesses to that. They seen it all happen up there right in front of their house."

"Yes, but Sim was standing across the river, when he fired the shot. And since the bullet come from over here, this was where Noble got his death—else he'd still be living. That makes it our murder, don't it?"

"Not by a long sight! Sim could 'a' stood in Menefee and shot this way from now to New Christmas; but if he hadn't hit nobody, he wouldn't be guilty of crime. As it was, he hit a man in Wolfe County; that man died here—so it's jest plain reason that our courts have got to avenge him. I'm a-going to see that they do it, too!"

Clint Hawkins threw a hand to his right holster, his fighter's jaw squared.

"Tom Salyers," he threatened solemnly, "if you try to take that feller, I'll send you to —— with him."

The Wolfe County sheriff's eyes glittered, and his finger closed over the trigger of his Winchester.

"Let me warn you too, Clint Hawkins," he menaced. "Make a move toward him, and I'll plug you before you touch the water. He's my prisoner and I aim to pertect him accordin' to my rights under the law."

They glared across the swirling river at each other like two catamounts awaiting the signal of instinct to spring. Neither was bluffing, and both knew it. Usually mild-tempered and over-lenient when handling a matter of police, they were on their mettle now, conscious of their personal and official powers. Yet they were not fools. They had that quality of courage which recognizes fruitless self-sacrifice as akin to cowardice and which respects a worthy opponent.

"I wisht yo' boys' ud stop makin' so much fuss," broke in Sim, rebaiting his hook. "Ye didn't give me time to dig worms er seine no minners, and hit's hard enough gittin' these fish to swaller bacon fat without yo' all skeerin' 'em. Ye plumb disgust me, a-spilin' my sport on sech a fine mornin'. 'T ain't of'en that the water and air's both in my favor like this."

Tom Salyers turned the batteries of his wrath upon him.

"You fiesty rascal," he exploded, "why don't you come to one bank or the other? You ain't gaining nothing but a little time by camping out there."

Sim cocked a speculative eye. "What'll ye promise me if I paddle over to yourn?" he asked.

"I'll promise you a quick trial and a quicker trip down below to the 'lectric chair," the sheriff replied promptly.

"Umm. I'll have to study on that afore I call it a trade." He squinted toward the opposite shore. "Clint, what have ye got to offer if I let yo' take me prisoner?"

The burly peace officer swore.

"I'll give you three minutes to say your prayers and a chance to escape. Then I'll hand you out a death sentence on the run from these here holsters."

"Gosh!" Sim, shrugging, picked up his cane pole. "Yo' fellers sartainly have agreed fer oncet in yer lives. I shouldn't doubt but I'd best stay right whar I am, ontil I've got my fill o' fishin'."

"What do you figger on doin then?" demanded Clint Hawkins, alert.

"Wal—" Sim gestured down-stream—"maybe I'll jest cut loose and go on ontil I git from atween Wolfe and Menefee and float into Powell County. There ain't no dispute over who owns Red River thar—and I got a heap o' friends in them parts. The sheriff o' Powell is my paw's fust cousin," he added significantly. "Rick Conley has a master way o' takin' keer o' his folks, too."

Hawkins and Salyers exchanged frankly worried glances. They knew that what Sim hinted at doing was not impossible and that once in his native county, among friends and under the protection of his sheriff cousin, nothing short of an invasion by the State militia could effect his capture.

By this time, however, the trio were not alone. The crime of the morning before had stirred the attention of both counties, and, by an intelligence system peculiar to the Kentucky Mountains, every one in that section had been kept informed of the progress of the man-hunt. They knew that each sheriff had taken the trail in person at the head of a hastily conscripted posse; that Sim Conley, beguiled by his prime weakness, had sought refreshment at the still nearest the murder scene; and that the officers, throwing their deputies into skirmish formation and combing every cabin, ravine and thicket, were surrounding him there.

Sparsely settled as the region was, a small audience already had begun to gather on either side of the river. The curious ones were careful not to get too close to the place of threatened hostilities, but here and there a face peered from behind a tree trunk, while a few bolder mountaineers crouched in the open, apparently unarmed and unconcerned. From what the first-comers had heard and what they all now saw, the situation was as clear to them as to the three men directly involved.

Loping up the Menefee trail, astride a bare-backed mule, came Andy Spurlock, his swarthy features grim with anxiety and his rifle ready for action. He was a member of Sheriff Hawkins' posse, and he slid from his mount even before he reached his chief.

"Clint," he gasped in a whisper, "if we don't git him now, this here river will be as red as hit's name!"

And he told a tale which, for a minute, made the sheriff forget his contender on the opposite bank.

"That makes it a —— sweet mess, all right!" he exclaimed when Andy had finished. "With one of my regular deputies at home sick and the other clean out of reach way over on Licking, I'm p'intedly up against it!"

He pulled at his mustache, frowning. Then, decisively, he commanded in a low tone:

"Andy, you strike back to town as hard as you can go, pick up every man you can count on along the way and take 'em before Jedge Combs. Tell him I said to swear 'em in as deputies and give 'em all the ca'tridges for their guns that they can tote. Send word to any more you're shore of, too, and have the jedge do the same by them. Then you fetch 'em to the mouth of Wolf Pen Creek down there and let me know right off how many you got and how the land lays. Remember, you ain't to waste a single minute. This here business calls for quick work and a heap of it!"

Young Spurlock, with a brief nod, remounted and kicked his mule into a gallop.

Across the water came a jeering laugh.

"I can read your mind better'n you think, Clint Hawkins. Sending off for help, are you? Ain't sheriff enough to take your prisoner single-handed? Wal, I'm jest telling you we grow real he-men over here in Wolfe County. Any one of 'em can whop a round dozen of your Menefee tackies."

A chorus of loud snickers from sheltering trees and bushes on the other side applauded Tom Salyers' taunt.

Sheriff Hawkins flushed angrily, but he was not in the humor for empty banter.

"Mr. Salyers," he called, "knowing something that you don't, I counsel you to kick a few of your he-men out of hiding and tie guns in their fists. I've jest heard that the Conleys and their friends, down in Powell, are getting together to come up here and take Sim. They 'low that feeling's too strong against him in Wolfe and Menefee for him to get justice, and they've swore to capture him themselves and set him free.

"As for me," he concluded stiffly, "I'm a-going to stick right here and see this little game through. I don't need a single deputy to help me, neither."

Tom Salyers instantly became grave. He knew that Sheriff Hawkins was speaking the truth and what that truth meant.

The man on the raft, who was most concerned by the news, said nothing, but, jerking up his pole, landed a cat-fish on the logs beside him.

The Wolfe County sheriff beckoned to a deputy, who had arrived on the scene some minutes before but remained at a distance and held a whispered consultation. Directly the deputy strode away, taking one of the on-lookers with him, and both disappeared up the laureled mountainside.

"I'll be ready for them Powell County jayhawkers," Salyers said aloud, his gaunt figure more erect. "Before they get hold of my prisoner, they'll have to whop some of the fightin'est men in all Kaintucky."

"Yes," declared Hawkins, seating himself for the first time on a stump near by, "if they try coming up on this side of the river, they'll take more men home dead than they started with a-livin'. My boys'll show 'em who's running this county."

Both sheriffs boasted with a confidence that they did not feel. A whole clan of desperate mountaineers, armed with modern weapons and moonshine whisky, was a force to be reckoned with even when met with like numbers and due preparation. Under the circumstances, however, each officer had to rely upon his lieutenant to recruit the warriors who would defend his county against invasion, equip them as best he could and lead them to meet the attack.

More critical still was the fact that the Conleys already were gathering and might at any time cross the boundary. If that happened before late afternoon, the earliest hour that any considerable body of men could be assembled to oppose them, the fight would be short and one-sided indeed.

WITH this new danger threatening, a strained silence enveloped the vicinity of the whirlpool. Those who came to witness a bout of wits or perchance a fatal show-down between the two sheriffs, now realized that even they might be drawn into an inter-county war. Some of the onlookers slipped hurriedly away; others took guns from the concealment of their persons and glanced about for a convenient large rock or rhododendron clump.

Another Wolfe County deputy, who had been detailed to the bereaved home of Noble Martin, three miles up the river, came to report to Tom Salyers.

"How's Noble's brother Frank taking it?" the sheriff inquired anxiously.

The deputy shook his head.

"He ain't sayin' much," he replied, "jest standin' 'round by hisself and a-studyin'. I sidled up to him oncet and axed if he knowed yo' and Clint was down here wranglin over which county'll git to send Sim to the 'lectric cheer. But Frank he didn't 'pear consarned, 'lowed he aims to bury his dead afore he looks to the livin'—and went off a-studyin' ag'in.

"His woman axed me, though, to be shore and fotch home that bed-kiver and skillet Sim stole from their house early this mornin'. I calls hit pow'ful nervy o' him to kill a man and then go rob his brother whilst he's away waitin' on the corpse."

"It was nervy," agreed Tom Salyers—"but that ain't the worst of my troubles. This here business is gettin' more dangerous every minute. You go back and keep an eye on Frank Martin. Pacify him and his folks all you can, and don't tell 'em the Conleys are a-gathering."

Noon came. Sim, who had not spoken a word for a full two hours, laid aside his pole and, with some of the drift-wood, made a fire on the flat rocks he had forethoughtfully taken aboard. Soon the luscious odors of frying fish and baking corn pone floated from the raft to either bank.

Clint Hawkins, who had had only a snatched-up breakfast at dawn, sniffed and licked his lips. Tom Salyers, equally as hungry and unprovisioned, searched his pockets for a chew of tobacco. Sim, squatting over his fire, watched them furtively.

"I sartainly wish I could ax yo' fellers out to dinner," he drawled after a while, "but I take hit that ye wouldn't come if I did. Howsomever—" he stuck his jack-knife into a large fish in the skillet—"I can't sot by and see ye all starve. That ain't the way I was brung up.

"Here, Tom," with a dexterous swing of his arm, he flung the fish toward the Wolfe County bank, "that un's yourn. I got to ax yer pardon fer offerin' ye mud-cats, but hit 'pears them's the only sort that frequent this turn-hole. Clint, I ain't fergittin' yo'. Ketch this 'un and try yer tooth in him."

Sheriff Hawkins, fumbling the hot fish,

was about to do as invited when the growling voice of a fellow Menefee County man sounded on the mountainside behind him.

"Aw, why don't yo' two show some sense. Even if Sim is guilty o' murder in both counties and ain't hidin' out in neither, thar's a easy way to git him. Clint, yo' and Tom draw yer guns, level on him togither, and when I speak the word, pull yer triggers. That'll settle the argument."

Clint Hawkins threw the untasted fish to a hound that was skulking near by. An inborn sense of honor forbade his eating the food of a man whose life he sought.

"What do you say to that idee, Salyers?" he demanded, springing up.

Sheriff Salyers deliberately dropped his fish into the river.

"It won't do," he snapped. "To kill a feller who ain't resistin' arrest, would be plain murder. I won't take a hand in such doin's myself and I'll bear witness in open court against any man who does."

"But what if Sim acts on his notion to cut loose and drift on down out of our reach?" persisted Clint Hawkins. "Are we going to suffer him to do that?"

Tom Salyers also saw the need of some sort of compromise.

"Wal," he said thoughtfully, "I'll meet you ha'f way there. If he tries to go down the middle of the river, he'll be a fugitive from justice. Me'n' you will see him start at the same time, I reckon, and we'll both open fire. How's that?"

Sheriff Hawkins nodded.

"That suits me exactly," he said, and reseated himself on the stump. "He belongs to us both the second he cuts loose."

Sim Conley abruptly quit eating. He stared a moment at Sheriff Salyers, then at Clint Hawkins; tried to speak, mumbled to himself instead, and groped for his rifle.

For half an hour he sat hunched over on the raft, the gun across his lap, brooding into the water. All sarcastic levity was gone from his unshaven features and a strange solemnity masked them. In spite of the midday heat, frequent shivers wracked his bent figure and his teeth chattered.

"Whar's the nighest preacher?" he finally broke out, addressing no one in particular.

Sheriff Hawkins, wondering, answered—

"Parson Pence, over on Salt Fork, I reckon."

"Would ye kindly send somebody to fetch him?" Sim asked, and his earnestness was akin to humility. "I want to confess my sins and be baptised afore hit's too late."

"I'll go atter him," volunteered a Wolfe County onlooker. "He's up at Noble Martin's, a-comfortin' his widder."

A while later Sim appealed to Sheriff Salyers.

"Tom," he said, "will yo' all grant me a truce and sware not to tech me if I pull into the sand-bar and meet the preacher?"

Salyers hesitated. "What do you say, Hawkins?" he inquired across the water. "Even a man-killer, deservin' of death himself, has a right to get religion, ain't he?"

"I give my word not to hinder him," the Menefee sheriff promised. "He'll be safe ontil he's done coming through."

IT WAS an unusual ceremony even in that country where unusual happenings are the rule. Old Parson Pence, a tattered song-book in hand, stood with Sim knee-deep in the riffle and began his favorite hymn, "How Firm A Foundation." The men on either bank, gathering at the water's edge and baring their heads, took up the words from memory and sang them through to the last verse, thunderous bass harmonizing with plaintive minor.

Denizens of a lonely land, where folk worshiped as hard as they fought, there was no hypocrisy in their reverence. They heard Sim's voluble confession with stony faces, bowed while the parson "wrastled in prayer" over his many sins, chanted another hymn as the penitent went under the water—and unsheathed their guns and resumed their former posts when he again boarded the raft and the old man disappeared down the river toward home.

With the lowering sun came sinister and similar reports to the sheriffs. Their lieutenants had not found it easy to get recruits whose primary object was to protect a lone criminal whom both counties claimed as prisoner. Each mountaineer was intensely individual from environment and tradition; he did his own thinking and acted according to his own judgment, and his pioneer training had taught him that a man's first duty in such a crisis is to remain at home and defend his own family. All knew very well that the Conleys would not stop simply at rescuing their kinsman, but, aroused by that outlawish errand, would pillage and burn and kill along the way.

"I got only a sparse dozen men," reported Sheriff Salyers' deputy, returning, "and they's 'most as bad as the Conleys. The others I axed says fer yo' to go on and let Clint have Sim; he ain't worth gittin' kilt over. They 'low that ye're causin' more trouble then ye're stoppin', by actin' mulish like this."

Salyers scowled.

"Who's sheriff of this here county, anyway?" he demanded hotly. "Ain't I jest trying to hold up the law as it's writ and bring a criminal to justice? Of course I am—and I'm not going to give a inch of ground, even if my feller citizens have gone back on me. I aim to stay right here until this thing's settled my way.

"You take what men you've got," he ordered, "and scatter 'em along the Powell County line. If them Conleys start up this side, fight 'em off as long as there's a one of you left alive. Hear me?"

Andy Spurlock was holding a like council of war with his chief.

"I tell ye, Clint, this ruction's got mighty unpopular in Menefee," he declared. "I'll do jest as yo' say with the few boys I got—but I ain't promisin' nothin' except from myself. Hit's plain now that them Conleys air waitin' till dark afore they begin their deviltry. They's a mile over on their side o' the line, in a holler back o' Bald Knob, lickerin' up and practisin' at targets. Ye know what that means!"

Sim Conley had not resumed his fishing. He sat with his knees bent up under his chin, his slouch hat pulled low, apparently dozing. But beneath that hat a pair of cunning eyes were mapping the flanking mountainsides, locating every ravine and thicket and bowlder, heedful, too, of the deepening shadows that soon would make concealment certain once those wooded heights were attained. The whirlpool made swimming down-stream impossible, and up the river, beyond a giant sycamore which in falling had bridged the current, was the hostile region of the Martin homes. Besides, the water in that direction was too shallow for a prolonged dive. And Sim, by nature, much preferred to take his chances on land.

Tom Salyers was restlessly pacing the Wolfe County bank, the Winchester still in the crook of his arm. Now and then he paused to listen, but all he heard was his own weary breathing, the gurgle of the water and the mournful whistle of a whippoorwill. His little audience of onlookers, losing interest in the deadlock, had drifted away, one by one.

Directly he halted and faced the opposite shore.

"Clint Hawkins," he began, "me'n' you can't stay here like this all night. You ain't had nothing to eat since daybreak and I 'low you're purty well wore out. Swaller your stubbornness this once, and then we'll both go home."

"I reckon I ain't more wore out than you are," returned Sheriff Hawkins, grinning feebly. "You was up beating the brush all last night too, and I've seen your acting today. Tom Salyers, I'm a-going to allow that you've got more nerve than I ever give you credit for. You've toted fair with me in this mess and you ain't the sneak that several folks have told me you was."

"Your county needn't be ashamed of you, neither," Salyers' tone was almost cordial. "But—" veering back to the original subject—"I do think you ought to let me have Sim. I thought a heap of Noble Martin and I want to lay holt of the man who killed him."

"Noble was a mighty good friend of mine, too. I feel like I owe it to him to see he's rightly avenged. It's a personal private matter with me there."

"Wal, whichever jail-house gets this prisoner will have to be held against his folks who are a-coming. They'll attack it shore, to set him free. Arresting him now will jest be the start of worse trouble for one of us."

Cint Hawkins pondered this fact thoughtfully. The vision of his county seat turned into a battlefield by a drunken mob, bent on destroying all who opposed them, and perhaps put to the torch, was not pleasant even to a man of his militant instincts.

Sim Conley sensed immediate danger to himself. Hunger, weariness and the developments of the afternoon were plainly working like a leaven in the brains of both sheriffs. Any minute now a compromise might be effected between them—and the Conley clan was still miles away.

"I'm a saved man and I ain't afeerd to die," Sim muttered confidently to himself, "but even Parson Pence didn't 'low that one who's come through hasn't a right to fight fer his life. Gittin' religion can't nowise mean that I've got to let myself be hung. I'll sware to be a sober, law-abidin' citizen if I kin jest git out o' this. I'll throw away my rifle-gun and 'tend meetin' regular. Yas, I will!"

The mountainsides were blackening, wisps of mist veiled the coves and hollows, and an obscuring purple haze was creeping up the river valley. The sun, long lost behind the western summits, turned into crimson a lone white cloud just above the whirlpool, staining the restless waters with its reflection.

Sim sprawled flat on his stomach, facing up-stream, his rifle close beside him, and, pretending to dabble aimlessly in the current, grasped the anchoring chain. Link by link he slowly drew it in, moving the raft nearer the sand-bar. The figures of Sheriffs Hawkins and Salyers were barely discernible from the river.

"Tom," boomed a determined voice, "we're going to strike a trade right here and now. Do you still want that Conley for your prisoner?"

A moment's hesitation; then, from the Wolfe County bank:

"Wal, I ain't so particular as I was. Since you're so sot on having him, I'll wade out with you and help pull——"

The raft scraped the sand-bar. Sim grasped his rifle and reached for the pile.

"——! Where's he gone to, Clint?"

"I don't— Yes, there he is! Run up and cover him from your side, quick! Let's take him alive!"

Among the branches of the fallen sycamore, a few rods up-stream, there was a sudden movement. Sim saw it, let go of the pile to have both hands for his rifle and swayed erect as the raft swung backward. Then he gave a wild, hopeless cry.

A line of flame spurted from the sycamore. The report crashed along the resounding water, shattering the mountain stillness. Sim staggered, dropped his rifle and clutched his breast.

"Frank Mart——"

"Shut up!" bellowed Clint Hawkins. "Can't neither of us see clear enough to bear witness who it is!"

A pause, while the hills muttered the fatal echo.

"Anyway, it's happened on middle-ground," Tom Salyers added artfully, "not in your county or mine, and it's p'intedly none of our business."

The raft ran the length of its chain and stopped again over the crimson-stained whirlpool. A guttural groan, a loud splash, and it floated free of human freight.

Perched up a neighboring cove, a whip-poorwill whistled a tuneless requiem.

"I reckon the Conleys will have sort of a hard time capturin' him from old Red River there," Sheriff Hawkins mused aloud through the dusk. "One thing's certain, I ain't going to be here to interfere."

"Me neither," Sheriff Salyers declared. "There's a late supper and a soft bed calling me away for a spell. Wish you'd go 'long and enjoy 'em with me."

"Can't jest now, Tom; but I'll come over some other day, shore as I live. Good night."

"Don't you forget that promise. I'll be a-looking for you. Good night, Clint!"

OLD SPUD'S LAST FIGHT

by E.O. Foster

Author of "A Bit of a Sphit," "Paddy Miles, Fighting Man," etc.

"Th' wurrst bridge I iver crossed I nivver came to ut—they tuk me off ut on a stritcher."—Old Spud.

THE thin brown line of the Second Battalion of the ——teenth U. S. Infantry, extended as skirmishers, was advancing by rushes up the long slope whose crest marked the divide between the Pasig and Zapote Rivers. Companies D and E were covering the rice fields to the right of the Manila-Zapote road and F and G were splashing through the mud and water of the recently irrigated "paddies" at the left.

Walking briskly along the macadamized road, Major John T. Morphy—"Old Spud" to the rank and file of his command—was keeping a sharp lookout, giving orders through the batallion adjutant, Lieutenant Miles, turning from time to time to observe the disposition of the rear guard, or to confer with Captain Potts, in command of the one battery of artillery that was jingling and clanking along behind him.

Already the main body of the insurgent army, in full retreat after their defeat in the scrap at San Pedro Macati Ridge the day before, had dropped below the divide, an occasional bullet from their rear guard in the old trenches at the crest serving as a reminder that they intended to delay the advance till the main body crossed over.

There was a quickening of pace along the deployed line, a slapping of haversacks against thighs, a rattle of tin cups against canteens, an occasional yell from the companies on the flank, now swinging in a scissors movement to conform to the half-moon of the bend in the river outlined by the divide. Already a gap to the left showed where the flanking company in its anxiety to get into position for the final rush at the crest had advanced too fast.

"'Halt;' blow 'Halt!'"

Old Spud did not intend to leave a single sniper uncovered in the advance, for snipers had cost the lives of twenty of his wounded men the day before, killing the stretcher-bearers as they bore their disabled comrades to the rear, leaving revoltingly mutilated corpses pegged out on ant-hills as an example of what "the little brown brother" can do when really at his best.

The flanks slackened their pace for a moment, quickening it again as soon as the gap was narrowed. The insurgent rear guard, four hundred yards away, stuck sullenly to their trenches, pouring a hot fire into the American lines, clipping the grass from the low dikes that outlined the paddies, an occasional bullet finding its billet either in the infantry or in the artillery, already beginning to deploy to right and left of the road.

"—— to ——, Mr. Miles, see the divvils leg ut!"

Old Spud was doing a bit of double time, unmindful of the increasing spurts of dust thrown by the insurgent bullets as they dropped closer and closer in the road. The old man was in his element. He was happy as a cannoneer just promoted gun corporal. For two years he had campaigned around the Philippine Islands always looking for a scrap—a real scrap that would enable him to affix another battle-name to the regiment's flag. Ordered before a retiring-board ten days later, this would be his last chance before he was placed on the shelf.

"Shall I have the bugler blow 'Recall'?"

The adjutant was limping a bit. Already a Mauser bullet had clipped through his legging and shoe, grazing the ankle-bone and taking a bit of skin with it.

"'Recall!' Ye moight as will blow 'Church Call' in Hades, for all the attention thim hill-roarers o' mine wud pay to ut!"

Old Spud had the scent of powder in his nostrils. He knew the terrane ahead of him and felt sure that the main body of the insurgents already were across the Zapote, ready to make another stand.

"No, —— ut, till him to blow 'The Char-rge!' We'll clane thot chrest ahid, and see whot's on the ither soide. Niver moind thot bugle, niver moind——"

The major had spotted the first platoon of the left company as it swung in and turned the flank of the insurgents, sending them helter-skelter down the three-hundred-yard slope to the bridge. He hurried forward, following the road as it led through the cut that lowered it below the level of the crest.

"*Sche-e-e-w!*" menaced a three-inch shell as it ricochetted from the hard macadam, the "*bam-hrrrupmh!!*" of its exposition jarring the atmosphere and sending a cloud of shrapnel over the rear guard.

"Blow 'Halt!' Blow '*Halt!*' "

The major threw himself flat as the wind of another shell lifted his campaign hat and stirred the gray thatch that outlined his wrinkled forehead. The old boy rolled to the edge of the road and worked his way up the embankment to the shelter of a clump of bushes on the right, closely followed by the adjutant and bugler. He looked up and down the line. His men already were under cover, sniping at the insurgents hidden behind the breastworks on the opposite side of the river.

The rear guard had halted and were already lying prone in the shelter of a dike. He smiled grimly as he saw gunner after gunner fall around the insurgent cannon. Three hundred yards was "pie" for the sharpshooters of the "Siccond."

The battery already was wheeling its guns into position ready to try conclusions with the enemy. Things were going well. It would be only a matter of a few minutes until the enemy's guns were silenced and then he'd show them a trick or two. A little trick like pouring in a red-hot fire, another advance by rushes, and a drive across the bridge, and then—cold steel.

The jar of an explosion shook the ground beneath him even before he heard the report and saw the center pier of the old stone bridge go hurtling skyward. Before the last bit of débris had splashed its way to the deep bottom of the sluggish stream he was up on his feet sweeping the terrane with his glasses, seeking a way to move his living pawns so as to mate this last check.

It was no easy task that confronted the old warrior. He was too good a soldier to waste his men needlessly, and too good a fighter to lay "doggo" for hours until reenforcements could cross the river where it debouched into Manila Bay and attack the enemy's flank.

The insurgent fire dwindled beneath the steady sweep of his men's rifles. He could see the insurgent officers walking up and down their lines, steadying their men. Among them was the negro renegade who had deserted from the U. S. forces two months before to accept a commission as colonel in the insurgent army. The major's jaws set, their bony outline showing blue against the day-old stubble.

"Whot Oi'll do to thot —— blackbur-rd of a naygur 'll be plenty. 'Tis he thot killed Lawton ——"

The burst of a shell near by drew his attention to the job ahead.

Away to the left a group of white-clad *amigos* were watching the scrap from the roof of an old monastery. In the right foreground a herd of water-buffalo were feeding knee-deep in a newly flooded paddy, unmindful of the noise and tumult.

There came a sudden darkening of the silver bowl of the sky, a patter of rain; and then with a shriek and roar the tempestuous *baguio* that had been lying in wait off the coast swept down upon them. The desultory firing ceased, the roar of Heaven's artillery making sad mock of the puny efforts of friend and foe.

Morphy was dumfounded. Here was the chance that he was looking for, a chance to strike a decisive blow at the enemy, and the river, already rising by leaps and bounds, defeating his purpose. A fine tale indeed to report to headquarters, to the chief that had neglected to order out a company of engineers for such an emergency!

Already the artillery was shifting its position, its horses stretched to the utmost as they pulled the guns from the heavy mud of the fields to the hard surface of the road in the rear. Not a pontoon, not a boat, not even a native dugout in sight. A bad position for the "bist battalion of the bist rigimint in the service" to be in. Mechanically he wiped the dampness from his glasses, a suspicious moisture dimming his eyes as he returned them to the case.

THE crash of a falling tree as it toppled from its trunk drew his attention. He walked in the direction of the sound, edging through the sheets of rain that flapped from the taut line of the opaque sky. As he drew nearer he could hear the steady "clip, clip" of axes. Company D was at work. He could hear the voice of the captain as he directed his men in the work of trimming the thirty-foot bole which lay before him as he stepped from the gray of the storm into their midst.

"Cut 'em down. Load 'em on caissons. Run 'em to the river. Shove 'em across that gap in the bridge. Drive —— out of our little brown brothers before they know it."

Captain Lafrayne, regimental fusser, lady's man, forgot all his parlor tricks when it came to a question of fighting. His words were as short and decisive as his actions.

"Foine, captain, foine!"

Old Spud's face was lighted like a Christmas tree as he got the idea.

"Stiddy as ye are till I for-rum the battalion."

There was a running of orderlies, a gathering of company commanders, a shifting of men, a clinking of trace-chains, and before the last tree was cut, trimmed and loaded two of the longest timbers lashed together at their small ends and rigged with the heavy block and tackle always carried by the field artillery, the "Siccond" was stretched out in column formation along the road, ready for the advance.

"Where in the name of the howly Saint Pathrick is yer firrst platoon, Mr. Jansen?"

The major's temper was on hair edge now that he was ready to "go in."

"What do ye mane by showin' up minus the bist parrt of yer— Nivver moind now, don't be afther tilling me thot Sargint O'Leary and his min got losted or ye'll be losin' thot little bar that is diccoratin' yer shouldher-strops— Shut up, now I say, not anither worrud out o' ye."

The major moved down the column, checking up as he went along, telling the different officers how to dispose of their men so as to protect Company D as it placed the improvised shears in position to throw the logs across the gap in the bridge, ending always with the admonition to "git in behind thot company and drive across thot —— bridge the minute ut's laid as if the divvil himself were afther yez."

The rear guard had moved up and taken position along the crest ready to answer any fire directed against the advance. All was set and ready to go, and still the Major withheld the word while the column shivered in dripping garments. It was only a small part of his command that was missing, but missing it was, and he did not like to move until he knew where the stragglers were. They might be cut off, prisoners maybe, with an insurgent horde slashing them to pieces with bolo and creese. They might be lying secure in some coulée, too full of blue funk to raise their heads—but he did not allow himself to dwell on such a possibility. His "min" were game.

Came a crash of thunder, and the rain died away. Old Spud ran to the crest of the road and swept the right of the field below with his glasses. The missing men were still missing. The herd of water-buffalo, tails toward the wind, were feeding close to the river-bank five hundred yards away.

He could wait no longer. With a motion of his hand he gave the order to advance.

The wheel team on the caisson took up the walk, the trace-chains of the leaders, held in check, almost touching the ground, their drivers gradually increasing the distance so that when the section commander gave the signal "Trot" the four horses were pulling evenly. They topped the crest and at the command "Gallop" flew down the long, even slope as if on air, the cannoneers perched precariously on the timbers, Company D at "double time" behind them.

To the right and left the other companies, deploying again as skirmishers, advanced by rushes down the muddy slope, lying down and firing alternately, holding partly in check the enemy's fire. The reserve, lying prone, their rifles held steady by the slings, poured a steady fire into the enemy's cannoneers. It looked like an easy victory, a walk-over. Already the men of D were cheering as they slid the shears to the edge of the break and ran out the guy ropes. The first log, suspended from the tackle, began moving slowly forward at their urge to be dropped into place at Lafrayne's signal.

The Major, a hundred yards back, was sweeping the field with his glasses again. Everything was going right, but that lost platoon bothered him. On the right the water-buffalo were milling. He gazed steadily at them. A smile was just beginning to break the wrinkles on his ruddy cheeks when the shock of another explosion almost lifted him from his feet. He gazed in horror as he saw the bodies of the men on the bridge twist and writhe in the ascending débris of the second span, and straighten and quiver as they shot to earth or splashed into the Zapote.

Cursing like a pirate, he ran forward to assist his officers in re-forming the men. He helped drag the shattered bodies of the detachment into cover. He had done his best. *Now he was going to do his ——est.*

Up and down the line he raged like a caged tiger, unmindful of the bullets that sang, and spat, and whistled around him. He'd fight it out now, if it took every man he had; and his men, seeing red with rage, were of the same opinion and began to shed their garments, ready to swim the river.

"Stiddy min, stiddy! 'Tis me thot lid ye into this trap, and 'tis not for yez to be taking such chances till the roight momint comes. Hauld 'em now, make the dirty haythin keep their lousy hids down till we git anither thry at thim."

Already he had sent runners back to the battery with the word to bring up new material for the two spans now necessary. There was still a chance.

Again the storm broke in all its fury. The major saw the water-buffalo plunge into the stream, the first sweep of the rain cutting the hindmost from view as it plunged into the swirling torrent. Was that O'Leary hanging to the tail of the first animal?

The rattle of the caissons coming with the new timbers broke through the storm. As they drew nearer, the enemy, unable to see them, opened up again, and as usual fired too high to stop their approach. Again the shears were run into place, the concentrated fire of two companies keeping the enemy from gaining control of the bridgehead. The first break was bridged, and the shears were being "legged" forward to the second gaping hole when a lucky shot from one of the enemy's guns, fired point blank, knocked them into smithereens.

In the confusion that followed the insurgents placed sandbags across the farther bridgehead and settled down to the job of keeping the structure swept clean. The heavy mud in the surrounding fields kept the artillery from deploying, and they could not fire over the heads of the survivors of Company D.

It seemed an age before another pair of shears was in place, and, slipping, falling, cut to ribbons by rifle fire, the first detachment started across, Old Spud, raging like a demon, his revolver spitting like an angry wildcat, at their head. They were met half-way by an insurgent detachment, the negro renegade at their head. Their rush drove the Americans back.

With half the first company down, the officers ordered the men off the bridge, pulling the major from the grip of the black. Struggling in the grasp of his officers, threatening them with everything from a general court martial to eternal hellfire, the major went berserk. With a yell for volunteers, he broke from the friendly hands of his subordinates, and started across the bridge again. Like unleashed bulldogs F Company followed.

Above the noise of the storm came the clashing of steel, the sough of the bayonet as it sank deep into flesh, the suck of the weapon jerked forth, as white met brown, bayonet against bolo, and like the meeting of the tides, the froth of the apex, locked in death grips, slid slithering into the river, tinging its muddy current with swirling blood. The major, cool again, cool as the barrel of the empty pistol the negro was snapping in his face, moved to one side, crowding his adjutant back, pivoted and swung on the receding jaw of the negro. He might as well have hit an ox.

With a yell the renegade clasped Old Spud around the body and began tightening his arms in a boa-like grip. Try as he would the major could not break the hold. Back of him his men were trying to shove their bayonets past his body into the black, one of them hacking at the gorilla-like fists.

He felt a ripple of unconsciousness begin its stealthy creep upward. The Stygian tide lapped at his knees, slapped his waist, clutched at his heart.

He heard faintly the sound of American cheers to the right of the insurgent trenches. He wondered if the men of the old monitor *Monterey* anchored off Paranacque had heard the firing and were coming to the rescue. He choked—and suddenly he felt the giant arms slacken and fall from his sides like lead.

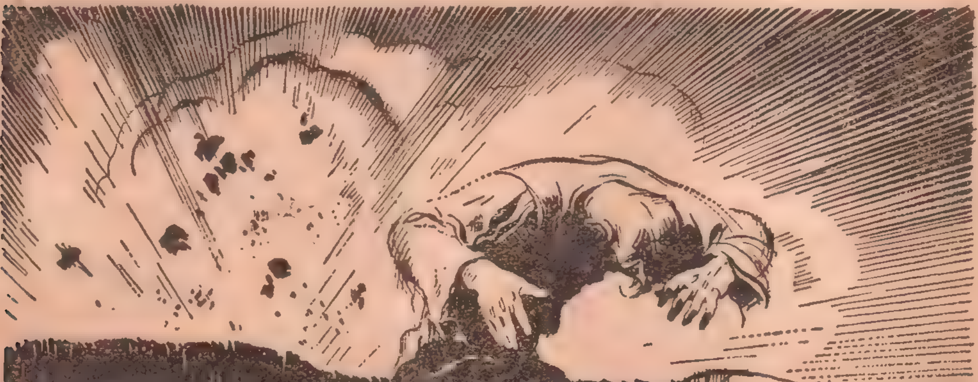
Above the pounding of his heart as it began pumping fresh blood through his congested lungs he heard the bull-like roar of Sergeant O'Leary, commanding the lost platoon, as he pulled his bayonet from between the renegade's shoulders. He felt the spatter of blood as the dying negro coughed in a last despairing effort to clear his lungs. He caught a glimpse of the hideous, blubber-like lips that had been gibbering in his face a moment before. They turned a sickly, brownish-green as the body toppled suddenly sidewise into the river.

"O'Leary, —— yer sowl—" the major's words came haltingly—"whot the divvil do yez mane by quittin' the command? 'Tis a giniral court ye should have——"

Old Spud's eyes filled with tears. The strain had been too severe, and for once in his life he could not hide his real nature under the harsh cloak of military discipline.

"——, sargint, ut was a paich of a scrap. Had ye not swum that torrint with yer water-buffalo cavalry when ye did Oi'd 'a' gone over the River and been answering 'Reveille' tomorry marnin' with the sodjers and sailors on Fiddlers' Grane. God bless ye, sargint—ye've saved th' day."

ON THE Regimental colors of the ——teenth, in the long list of battles beginning with "Chapultepec" and ending with the "Argonne" are the words "Zapote Bridge," and from the day of that fight no officer or enlisted man has ever been admitted to full membership in the regiment until he can repeat the story of Old Spud's last fight.



ONE NIGHT AT OSABA

by Edwin Cole

Author of "The Call of the Whippoorwill," "To Quit My Post," etc.

SERGEANT JOHNSON was taking his platoon down the Osaba Trail. It was his first patrol, and he was a proud man. Also he had a sufficient sense of his responsibilities; for hitherto in that wild country where the mountains of Arizona jostle those of Mexico no detail of X Troop had gone forth without an officer or the top sergeant in charge.

But the captain and the second lieutenant had ridden over to headquarters at Nogales on company business. The lieutenant was in charge of camp, and Lawton, the top sergeant, was off with some rangers on a cattle-rustler hunt.

So Johnson had been given the detail; and now he rode at the head of his sixteen troopers with instructions to make the Osaba mine by nightfall and investigate a complaint of its manager that certain undesirable citizens of Mexico had come over the border and were stirring up discontent among his Mexican operatives.

The trail followed the valley of Arivaca Creek for several miles and then left it for the mountains to the south. It was late afternoon, and the detail had put the passes behind them and were dropping down into an extensive hollow in the hills, at the bottom of which lay the little mining settlement of Osaba beside the artificial pond that furnished it power.

Sergeant Johnson had taken scouting formation out of caution. A point of two men rode a few hundred yards ahead, and in the rear another pair followed at a slightly shorter distance.

The walls of the cañon through which the platoon was passing rose steeply to the shoulders of mountains on either side. There was nothing of beauty in these mountains. They were bare rock of tortured shapes, to which clung here and there the hardy mesquite and the prickly cactus. Yet the heat of the semi-tropic day was passing, the sky was a flawless turquoise and the air vital.

It was good to be alive, the sergeant reflected, to have these fine men and horses under his charge, to be on an important errand.

A turn and dip in the trail exposed the settlement to his view. The pond lay like a great round blue eye far below him. About it squatted like doll houses the mine buildings. To one side the scars in the mountain indicated an upper shaft of the mine. He had been on this patrol before under the second lieutenant. He remembered that then smoke rose from those diminutive buildings. Now they lay as if deserted.

Beside the sergeant rode one of his corporals. It was his first sight of the Osaba, and he exclaimed in delight at the picture; for about the shores of the artificial pond grass had sprung up and from this distance looked like a lovely meadow.

"Almost as good as New England!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't think this country could look so peaceful."

As the sergeant was about to answer there came the sound of a distant popping to their ears. The point ahead came riding back.

"There's shooting going on down there, sergeant," reported one of the men. "We could see puffs of smoke from below the dam."

Sergeant Johnson stiffened in his saddle. Shooting! He had not counted on that. His officers had not, else they would have sent a bigger force and one of them have taken charge of it. Was he taking his men into battle?

"Drop back in the line," he ordered the point.

He signaled the trot with his closed fist, and the detail clattered down the rocky bed of the cañon.

The settlement was hidden from their sight again by the walls of the winding cañon. Then they came out into the valley a mile or so above the pond. The shots sounded louder now, and the sergeant gave the signal to gallop.

They reached the upper end of the pond and followed the sandy trail along its shore. The sergeant could see figures crouched behind the nearer end of the dam now. They were using it as a breast-work and were shooting down the valley beyond. A bullet sang over their heads; another splashed in the pond beside them.

Then came a joyous shout from the defenders at the dam. The shooting ceased there, and only desultory firing sounded from beyond.

The sergeant led his platoon behind the shelter of the mine buildings; and the manager stepped forward, grim and anxious of countenance but patently relieved at the reenforcements.

"Glad to see you!" he said grimly.

He was a short, wiry man with fighting blue eyes, and he carried a Winchester that looked as if it had seen use.

"Bunch of greasers came up the valley and scared my men off—all but these Welshmen," he added, nodding toward a handful of grimy white men, armed like himself with rifles.

"They sent word that they wanted ten thousand dollars 'back pay,' and if they didn't get it they'd dynamite the dam and help themselves. I told them to go ahead."

Sergeant Johnson ordered his men to dismount and keep themselves and their horses under cover.

"Suppose they'll beat it now they know we are here," he said regretfully.

"Not so sure of that," retorted the manager. "They've got some of Villa's old army down the valley, I understand, and they mean to have a show-down."

"Well, there are more where we came from," grinned the sergeant, "if they are needed."

"Trouble is they know that and the big show will be tonight," answered the manager more gravely. "They were getting ready to rush us when you showed up. We wondered what made them change their minds the last minute. They must have seen you coming before we did. They had snipers up on the hillside."

"Well, let's look around and see what our defenses are," suggested the sergeant.

Night was coming on fast. It had darkened appreciably since the patrol had reached the valley.

The great hills threw the valley into an ever deepening shadow. Above these spread the lurid colors of an Arizona sunset, beautiful but unreal, laid on with too lavish a brush.

The looking-around was done mostly from the concealment of the shoulder of the dam. This stretched, a smooth crown of concrete, a hundred yards across the narrow crevice of the valley. Below it the valley widened and fell sharply away. All about the pond rose a barrier of mountains.

"What's to hinder the Mexicans from climbing up there and shooting down on us?" the sergeant asked, pointing to the mountains.

"Nothing; but what'll we be doing in the mean time?" retorted the peppery miner. "There's mighty little cover on those hillsides in the daytime, and at night we can fire at their flashes. No, they'll come up the valley when they come. There are plenty of mesquite thickets and boulders down there. What I'm afraid of is that some one of them will sneak up with a few sticks of dynamite and touch it off at the base of the dam. We can enfilade 'em in the daytime, but at night they might get away with it."

"Then it looks to me as though we ought to stand guard at the base of the dam," said the sergeant.

Coombs threw him a quick glance.

"Sure," he answered dryly. "That's the proper move—but who are you going to find to do it and take a chance of going up or going under according to whether they get the blast before the dam goes?"

"I've got sixteen men who will do it," the sergeant replied promptly.

The miner shook his head.

"I wouldn't have the heart to ask them," he announced finally.

"You don't have to. I reckon it's our job," retorted the sergeant.

Now the manager protested.

"It ain't worth the price," he said. "Let 'em blow up the dam. They'll put themselves out of a job, and somebody back East will lose a dividend. That's better than losing a score of good lives."

"I don't figure on losing either," answered the sergeant. "Our job's to protect life and property. How would I look going back and telling the captain that I didn't do it for fear of getting hurt?"

Coombs threw up his hands hopelessly.

"Have your own way. There's no use arguing with a soldier. He gets a few dollars a month for taking a chance of getting killed, and he's sore if he doesn't get the chance. You can do it," he declared, "and if you are fool enough to try it, why I'm fool enough to go with you. I'll send a half-breed back to your camp with any word you want. One of your own men would probably be gobbled up."

And so it was settled. The sergeant scribbled a note to the lieutenant telling him the situation, and it was sent off by the loyal half-breed as soon as he could get away under the cover of darkness. Then the platoon, led by Coombs himself, filed down a path to the creek-bed below the dam.

The sergeant posted his men at intervals with instructions to take what cover they could and shoot on sight any one approaching from down the valley. Coombs had left his watchmen and a few trusty Mexicans to guard the buildings and the horses. He and the sergeant took up the post of danger at the center of the dam.

It was like being at the bottom of a well. The face of the dam rose steeply behind them. The lofty mountains shut off the horizon on all sides. Above, the stars shone with unreal brilliance, and so deep was the gloom of the creek-bottom that the sergeant could not make out the guard on either side of him. Had he been right after all in letting his men take such chances? he wondered.

Well, he could not back out now in any case. That would be showing the white feather. He must make the best of it.

And after a time he found that by keeping his eyes fixed before him and away from the stars his horizon broadened. He could distinguish now a clump of mesquite, darker than the surrounding gloom, some fifty yards down the cañon. He had the feeling that he could detect any movement between his station and this.

Coombs sat within arm's reach, his back to the dam, Winchester on his knees.

"If I'd remembered I couldn't smoke down here I'd never have agreed to come," he grumbled once in a hoarse whisper.

The night wore on. A coolness settled down in the cañon bottom that made Johnson wish he had ordered the men to bring their blankets. Once a stone was dislodged to his right, and he grasped his Springfield, tensely waiting for an alarm. But none came and he relaxed. Doubtless a careless trooper, he concluded.

He glanced curiously at Coombs. The miner's attitude suggested that he had gone to sleep. His head hung forward and his body was slouched. Tired out, the sergeant thought.

Off on some hillside a coyote barked. It was answered from the opposite side of the valley. The sergeant pricked up his ears. Was it a coyote? Or was it a signal?

But the light was improving. The clump of mesquite stood out more distinctly. It seemed nearer. It was nearer!

Sergeant Johnson had never read "Macbeth." He had never heard of the Forest of Dunsinane. But as he sat there tensely with his eyes glued to the thicket before him it dawned on him that this age-old strategem was being played. Part of that thicket was moving toward him!

He covered it with his rifle and waited. Could he trust his own eyes? He dared not nudge his companion. If Coombs indeed slept his awakening might give premature warning to the enemy. Was it not his imagination after all? Yes, it must be, for there was no further movement.

Then to his left at the base of the dam came the flare of a match. The sergeant swore. One of his men lighting a cigaret against his express orders. He would see about that. He strode angrily toward the light. It was a mere flicker now, but enough to draw fire at any moment. It must be a pipe the man was lighting.

"What are you doing there?" the sergeant called in a hoarse whisper.

His answer was the sound of running feet. He in turn ran forward. The light sputtered on.

It all came to him in a flash now.

Under the cover of the mesquite boughs a Mexican had worked to within a few yards of the dam and then wormed up to it with the dynamite. The match was a fuse!

IT COULD hardly be called deliberate bravery that actuated the sergeant's next move. He had no recollection later of reasoning the thing out, although he did remember visions of a toppling dam and twenty-five feet of water sweeping over him.

He sprang forward. There lay the wicked stick, faintly outlined in the light of its fuse, tucked neatly against the base of the dam. He caught it up and hurled it with all the strength of his good right arm in the wake of the hurrying footsteps. There followed a long moment of suspense, and then—cataclysm!

Hurled back against the wall of the dam, he saw the valley vomit fire. His eardrums were filled to bursting with sound. The end of the world had come, was his thought.

Out of the black void that followed he heard the voice of the miner. It seemed far away—a mere squeak; yet his brain formed the words.

"You're not hurt, are you?" the miner was asking anxiously.

The sergeant's senses came slowly back. He put his hand to the back of his head and felt a tremendous bump. Then he got to his feet.

"So that was what it was!" he said. "The dynamite?"

"I'll say it was," agreed the miner, chuckling. "I don't know whether it was enough to break the dam or not, but I'm glad we didn't have a chance to find out. Let's see how your men came through it."

They made the rounds together. There was no one seriously hurt, although some of the men had suffered minor bruises from flying stones.

After inspecting the guard, the sergeant and Coombs returned to their posts. But the Mexicans had shot their bolt. The remainder of the night passed without incident.

With dawn the sergeant led his detail back to the mine buildings. One of Coombs' spies was awaiting him there and babbled something in Spanish to the miner.

"They have beat it," Coombs explained; "and their leader has gone for good," he added with grisly humor. "It seems he got in the way of the dynamite."

As sergeant Johnson stood talking with him one of the guard shouted joyously—

"Corporal of the guard—armed party."

Johnson looked in the direction of the call, and a lump rose in his throat, for he saw the red-and-white guidon of the troop. It had made an all-night march and was defiling out of the trail into the valley.

PARTNERS

by

John Joseph Scarry

"GETTIN' late, 'Yank.' Better tie up 'ere."

"Left bank?"

"Aye—end o' that patch o' mangroves."

Kenaston shut off his motor and gave a quick spin to the wheel. Ford, at the bow, made fast to an overhanging branch, and the boat, after nosing gently among the roots, drifted the full length of its painter, swinging around in the sluggish current. At last it came to rest broadside-on to the steep shore of a wide, sandy bar. The flaming aftermath of the tropic sun faded rapidly to purple and gray.

Ford dropped at once to the cockpit and began to forage in one of the forward lockers. He brought forth cold steamed rice in a big pan and several blackened strips of dried swine-meat. These he regarded with a look of utter disgust.

"Chuck's rotten!" he snarled. "Can't make a go of it on any such muck as that."

Having delivered himself of this fuming comment, he fell into a sullen contemplation of his companion tugging at a small tarpaulin.

Kenaston finished his task. He tied down the corners of the canvas and stood erect, wiping the oil and grease from his hands.

"Won't be too long now," he countered cheerfully. "Three-four days at the most, and we'll be back in Merauke."

"Yah, Merauke!" scornfully. Ford's smoldering wrath seemed to burst into flame. "Merauke'll be fine when we get there. But that ain't goin' to make up for the swill I've 'ad to put into me ever since I come out with you."

"I've been eating the same grub," said Kenaston quietly.

"You! What do you count? You're nothin' but a poor fool, an' a baby, an'—an' a thievin', miserly Yank!" Kenaston's lips tightened and paled, but he made no retort.

The two men were an oddly assorted pair, even in New Guinea, where extremes meet from all the ends of the earth. Kenaston was a young American, small and wiry, and Ford was New Zealand born—a man well beyond forty, heavily bearded and powerfully put together. But the oddness lay more in the types than in physique. The American's alert quiet manner and cool gray eyes afforded a sharp contrast to the swashbuckling speech and appearance of his older companion.

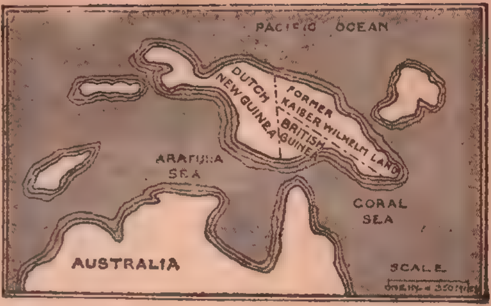
Three months earlier, when Kenaston drifted in from Singapore with a small stake and a firm determination to increase that stake in the bird of paradise game, he had found that all the hunters were far away in the interior, for it was then the height of the season. Unaccustomed as he was to the jungle, it would have been madness for him to venture alone against the dangers and hardships of the river. He had just about made up his mind to wander along to Australia until the following year, when chance threw him in with Ford.

The big New Zealander's reputation in Merauke was anything but savory. At the very least, he was known as a veteran hunter gone wrong—a hanger-on in low Chinese saloons, who was lodged and supported by a Javanese woman in a miserable bamboo shack on the water-front. Kenaston, however, was very anxious to learn the ropes as soon as possible. So, despite the earnest warnings of a few gray-bearded merchants, he worked upon Ford until that beachcombing individual agreed to lay his experience with the new-comer's money for half-shares in a short late-season excursion close to the coast.

Their outfit was scant, for it turned out that Kenaston's pocket-book alone could not stand the strain of more than bare necessities. But although certain deficiencies in armament and rations had been the cause of a great deal of harsh recrimination from Ford, there really had been no reason for complaint. Good fortune had been with them from the start, and for all the shortness of their stay in the interior, they were now returning to Merauke with bags that would do credit to far prouder expeditions.

Ford had proven himself a surly enough companion, but he was a hard worker and well-versed in the ways of the jungle. Kenaston had soon marked him an ill-tempered swaggering bully, but, with characteristic generosity, had laid it all to the man's sudden enforced abstinence from liquor.

He was not in the least unnerved by his partner's heavy growls and threats, but he had continually avoided making matters worse by joining in any wordy wrangling. All he wanted was enough experience to be able to put up a sound proposition to one of the better hunters for the following season and enough money to hold up his end properly.



Ford was evidently meditating on their luck as he slouched on the deck of the cockpit. He cast his eye from time to time at the five-gallon kerosene tins which held their skins.

"Ten thousand bloomin' guilders in birds," he mused aloud.

Kenaston was secretly overjoyed at this sudden shift from unreasonable rage to sulky satisfaction. The big man was ever changeable in his moods.

"It'd keep one man like a bloomin' toff for more'n a year," he went on, half-whining.

"We've done mighty well, thanks to you," Kenaston agreed heartily.

He squatted, native-fashion, on the deck.

"You can just bet it's thanks to me," came the unlooked-for savage reply. "You ain't done enough on this trip to pay yer board—even this rotten board we got 'ere."

Ford's heel shot out viciously and sent the pan of rice flying across the deck.

The contention was an absurd and deliberate falsehood, and the childish waste of food made Kenaston's blood boil. But he checked himself and picked up what was unspilled of the food.

"I'll just get my supper down, old man, before you lose your temper."

"What's your kick, anyway?" he continued coolly. "You knew what you were up against before you signed on. And you'll make enough to retire on when we get these birds off to Makassar—retire, or outfit yourself for next season."

"Next season! With who? You?"

"Not with me, Ford," the American answered calmly. "Not if I can help it. But I would though; I'm not afraid of you, you know. Sometimes I think you'd make a good partner if you'd get the alcohol out of your system."

Ford did not answer, nor could Kenaston determine whether it was cowardice in the face of cool opposition or feebly sparkling honest conscience that made the New Zealander hold his peace. And the next maneuver only added to his puzzlement. Ford turned again to the locker and produced a bottle of square-face gin.

"What d'ye say to a drink?" he asked, gruffly cordial.

Kenaston's heart sank, but his tone was friendly as he answered:

"Sure. Where'd you get it?"

"Never mind where I got it. There's plenty more where that come from."

But Kenaston thought he now understood the half-hidden bartering that had taken place that afternoon at a native village. He was more than a little worried by this new complication, for he could imagine what gin would do to the already disgruntled old-timer. It would be useless, though, to remonstrate, so he pretended to join in heartily, hoping to be able to cut short this unexpected drinking bout.

He took two drinks in the course of fifteen minutes, while Ford sat silently and consumed two cupfuls. Then he made his way aft to stretch his blankets. He lighted a final cigaret and lay down on the deck. But the continual chink of bottle against cup came from the bow, and he knew that Ford was still drinking.

"Hey, Ford!" he hailed at last, amicably. "Put it away, why don't you? We have to turn out early, you know."

"Shut yer mouth!" was the angry response. "Ain't no blasted Yankee miser goin' to tell me what to do. An' I'll turn out in the mornin' if I want to."

"Oh, all right," disgustedly. "I don't care."

Ford laughed bitterly.

"Huh! Maybe ye don't care. Catch you darin' to leave me behind for a day. Ye'd come back to find me gone—me an' the 'ole bloomin' outfit."

Kenaston bounded to his feet. He felt that the man was mouthing half-pondered plans and decided that it might be a good idea to put a few things straight. His words were rapped out steely-sharp as he stood over his recumbent partner.

"Look here, Ford! I've stood a lot of talk from you this trip, but don't you run away with the idea you've got my goat. I don't want trouble—and any trouble between us is going to be with guns. Get me? Talk if you want to—much good it'll do you—but the minute you try any monkey business with this boat or with the birds, I'll fill you so full of lead you'll think you're a hardware shop. Just you chew on that!"

And he turned back to his blankets, leaving Ford cursing under his breath.

FORD was very glum in the morning. He swallowed his rice and hardtack and tea without a word, and, shouldering his rifle, he strode away upstream between the mangroves and the dark edge of the jungle. Kenaston plunged directly into the forest, following an indistinct animal-trail.

The partners were then skimming over the ground they had hunted on their way up the river six weeks before. Kenaston's allotment for the day was a tree which stood in the center of a small natural clearing about two miles back from the stream. The birds were very shy; several hours elapsed after a shot before they would be sufficiently recovered from their fright to return to their favorite roost.

Bird of paradise hunters can usually depend upon three or four victims from one flock in the course of a long tropic day. The requirements are infinite Spartan-like patience in heat and discomfort and considerably more than ordinary skill with a .22 caliber rifle. Jim Kenaston was amply endowed with both these attributes and set about his work with quiet zeal.

But shortly after midday, when he had retrieved his second bird from under the "dancing-tree" and was strolling back to his hiding-place to wait for another shot, he stopped quite involuntarily and gazed around him into the gloomy depths of the jungle. The vague presentiment of lurking danger that had been with him for the last half-hour gripped all the more strongly as he scanned the shadowy mazes of ferns and entwining creepers.

"Got the feeling one of those black boys is watching me," he muttered. He twitched his shoulders and scowled.

Half-unconsciously, in his tense survey

of the encircling thickets, he crouched to traverse on his hands and knees the twenty feet that separated him from the rotting log where lay his water-bottle. Before his knees pressed to the rank gray moss underfoot, he heard the unmistakable vibrant buzz of a blow-gun dart singing past his ear.

His subsequent movements were desperately hurried but by no means panicky. Sudden emergencies were not new to Kenaston. Long experience out of doors had trained his muscles and his brain to react promptly to any hint of surprize. He wheeled and dodged from cover to cover, zigzaging across the clearing to the lone tree which had so lately shaken beneath a garish cataract of birds.

Flinging himself flat in the lush undergrowth, he fired three times in the direction from which he had come. There was very small chance that the random bullets would damage his assailant, but he knew by report that the untutored Papuans were awesomely afraid of firearms and could often be halted by a noisy show of resistance.

There came no answering cry of pain or defiance after the fusillade, nor any movement of foliage, so Kenaston settled down to await developments. His position was decidedly precarious. If the unseen marksman was alone, there was no danger of an open attack, but it was entirely possible that the thickets swarmed with savages who could easily overpower one man in a sudden rush. And ever there remained the dread menace of the cruel blow-gun.

"Darn funny," he thought to himself. "These chaps around here are supposed to be tame. Man! I don't like those arrows."

Kenaston knew what it was to be the target of a hidden foe in a white man's country, but this was something new. The thought of the deadly poisoned darts that could leave a man blackened and distorted after half an hour of agony filled him with that horrifying fear of the unknown that no leaden bullets had ever been able to summon.

The river was two miles distant. It was hardly possible that the noise of his unwonted succession of shots had penetrated the thick blanket of wilderness to warn his partner. In a way, this thought was comforting. He did not want the other man to come stumbling into the same ambuscade that was now threatening him. For a little while he lay very still, then parted the grass in front of his face. There was no sign of life in his green surroundings.

The sun, unhindered by the bare branches above him, drove its fierce rays through the heavy cloth of his khaki coat. Myriad tiny ants tortured with their strong jaws, and he was uncomfortably aware that two or three wood-leeches had entered at his belt to fasten themselves on his bare legs. But his worst torment was nervous, burning thirst. He thought of his water-bottle at the edge of the clearing with hot regret.

A quarter of an hour passed while Kenaston kept close watch all around and considered the situation restlessly. It was quite possible that there had been no more than one Papuan who had dared a single shot and then glided away.

"And if he's still here, the big brute'll get me after dark anyway," he thought.

Indeed, were there no savages at all, the prospect of a night alone in the black heart of the jungle was enough to bring pause even to a seasoned old veteran. Running the gantlet would be preferable to this torturing inaction; waiting only made his position less secure.

He looked to his rifle, vainly wishing for a more deadly caliber. There was, of course, a .30-30 Winchester stowed away in one of the lockers of the motor-boat. Scrimping and close figuring on their equipment had enabled the partners to purchase this weapon for use against larger game than birds and to serve as a protection in the improbable event of trouble with the natives. But three nights before Kenaston had shot away the last cartridges on a wild swine.

Very cautiously now, he drew his knees up under him. Just as he was about to spring to his feet, he felt a dull thud against his sun-helmet. Ducking quickly below the grass screen, he slid one hand over the brim of his hat. Quivering fingers drew forth a dart—slim pencil of death—from just above the puggaree.

"Whew!" he breathed. "I better move. Didn't know they could carry this far."

He threw all caution to the winds and made a swerving dash for the far side of the clearing. Muttering angrily under his breath, he dropped behind a thick trunk and scanned the opposite thickets.

Then, reconstructing in his mind his former position and judging by the direction the dart had taken in his helmet, he was able to form a fair idea of where the enemy lurked. Twenty yards frontage of fern seemed to conceal the spot. He ventured two or three searching shots.

He knew that he was now out of range of the blow-gun and must expect the hidden Papuan to change his position. The shortest and surest arc around the clearing was at the corner where the trail debouched. Kenaston kept sharpest watch on that side.

And it was not long before his eye was rewarded by a slight movement of leaves deep in the green curtain. Quick as lightning, he leveled his rifle and pumped four shots at the disturbance. A hoarse cry of pain was his answer—and the heavy sound of a big body falling.

"Got ye, you big savage!" Kenaston exulted as he leaped to his feet.

But he controlled his impetuosity and sank again to his concealment.

"Not going over to see you, Mr. Papuan," he muttered. "You may have friends. Anyway, these .22 slugs are not so very potent and I don't want to risk any more of your little presents. I'll just slope, I think."

Acting on his earlier determination, he made a wild dodging dash diagonally from his shelter to the path. There was no outcry as he fled, nor did tattooed warriors rise to oppose him. He heard no hiss of venomous dart as his speeding feet hit the soft black soil of the trail. Kenaston, however, did not linger in his flight.

At the end of a breathless mile, as he panted up a steep incline, he realized that he was not being followed. He slowed to a rapid walk—until the plain print of a naked foot heading away from the river brought him up short.

For a moment he stared, fascinated, at the fan-like spread of the toes. A sudden apprehension flashed across his mind.

"The boat!" he gasped, and hurried on.

But presently, when he burst out into the glaring sunshine of the river-bank, he saw their battered craft, floating apparently unmolested at the edge of the bar. He searched carefully for further trace of the footprints, but there was none in the sand. If the savage had come near the boat at all, he had contented himself with spying from the shelter of the thicket.

Kenaston was convinced by now that he had to do with a prowling lone native—who had got a lesson for his temerity—so he clambered aboard and started to throw together their meagre supper. He wondered what Ford would say to his adventure.

DARK approached, however, and Ford did not come back to the boat. It was altogether unusual for either of the partners to be still in the jungle after an hour before sundown, so Kenaston began to have an uneasy misgiving that his partner, too, had fallen in with hostile blacks and, perhaps, had come out second best.

Very much undecided as to the course he should pursue, he made his way up-stream for a mile or more until he came to the place where Ford's shod trail left the open to follow a path through a vast ironwood grove. Kenaston did not hesitate. For all the lateness of the hour, he plunged into the gloom of the forest until the quick fall of night made it impossible to go any farther.

He stayed there for an hour, shouting and firing off his rifle at intervals. But no answering signal came back from the dark.

After countless stumbles and falls, and wanderings from the path, he made his way to the stream. As he emerged from the ironwoods, a distant gleam of light from across the lowlands reminded him of the native village where his partner had got the gin.

"Those blackbirds there are at the bottom of this!" he decided. "Here's where I find out, if it costs me my head."

Deliberately laying his plan of action, he sped back to the boat.

He felt very much as if he were running his head into a lion's throat as he started his engine and turned into the current. He knew only a few words of the scant Papuan language, and he knew full well that one man with a .22 rifle would be of small avail against an onslaught of treacherous blacks. But his heart was cold with anger. He was determined to leave no stone unturned in finding and punishing the miscreants who were responsible for the non-appearance of his partner.

He drove the bow of his motor-boat deep into the muddy water-front of the straggling thatched village. Two or three-score of naked savages—warriors and women—left the circle of fires and crowded to watch his landing. Wondering at his own daring, the American leaped ashore, and apparently unconcerned, strode through the midst of the chattering spectators to the lighted compound in the center of the huts.

"Mombo!" he demanded sharply, calling the name of the chief.

Kenaston held his rifle ready and gazed around the circle of glistening faces.

The old man with whom Ford had done his bargaining the day before squirmed out from between two stalwart giants and faced the white man in the open. With his few words—and helped by elaborate signs—Kenaston made known that he was looking for his partner.

The chief shook his head decidedly. He had seen nothing of Ford. But the American was not to be put off so easily. Snatching off his hat, he thrust it under the native's nose to show the hole made by the dart. The old man looked at it and seemed to shrink. Then he broke out into a passionate discourse that was entirely incomprehensible to Kenaston. He gestured to the firelit ring of warriors and the white man remembered to look for the marks of recent wounds. He found nothing.

Suddenly he grasped the chief by the arm and signed for a tour of the houses. Every moment he expected to feel the hot stab of knife or arrow, but he shoved the muzzle of his rifle against old Mombo's ribs and led the way.

Very thoroughly he searched every house for some property of Ford's—his rifle, his boots, his coat—but without success. Two men with *damar* torches offered every possible assistance.

Puzzled and considerably worried, he stood for a moment in the firelight. He berated himself for his inexperience and his ignorance of the language. There was nothing he could do except continue his search in the morning. The villagers were certainly not hostile. His attacker—the man who had probably accounted for poor old Ford—might have been a strayed brave from some other village. It struck him that he would be able to trail that chap in the morning by following the blood marks.

He went back to his boat. Four men shoved him clear of the mud and the whole village trouped along to speed his departure with weird friendly calls.

IN THE morning, early, while he was breakfasting, he heard the faint sound of a motor-boat chugging up against the river. He rose to his feet, wondering, for at this season he expected no traffic away from Merauke. Five minutes later the boat rounded the bend and headed straight for his beach. Kenaston could see two white men in the stern and a Javanese machinist at the wheel.

"Britishers," he decided as they drew near.

"Hello," shouted one. "You're Kenaston, aren't you?"

"Yes," very much surprized.

"They told us in Merauke that you were here. Thought we'd come up and have a look-see. My name's Haddon. This is Strawbridge. We came down only four days ago but didn't see anything of you."

Kenaston recognized the names as those of two hunters he had heard mentioned while waiting in the town. He saw that the men were worn and saffron-colored under the tan from the fevers of the interior.

"We were up a side creek four days ago," he told them.

"Oh, to be sure. Where's Ford?" casually.

In a few words the young American related the events of the preceding day—told of his encounter in the clearing, Ford's disappearance, and the visit to Mombo's village. He added that he was planning to trail the wounded black.

"So you nicked the bird who potted at you?" asked Haddon with a glance at his companion.

"I heard him scream and fall."

"Might not be a bad idea to follow him up. Mind if we go along with you?"

Kenaston was only too pleased to have assistance in his predicament. The three men struck into the forest. Strawbridge strode along in front without a word, while Haddon kept up an intermittent flow of conversation with the American.

"Oh, no," he declared. "Couldn't have been any one from old Mombo's show. Known him for years. Dear old thing." And when Kenaston voiced his suspicion that his assailant might have been from some other village, he replied: "Really can't say. We'll see."

He expressed some surprize when his eye fell on Kenaston's light rifle—asked whether the partners had nothing heavier. Then he nodded abstractedly as he listened to the explanation.

The sunflecked clearing brought back to Kenaston unpleasant remembrances of yesterday's hurried encounter. He could not repress a slight shudder as he pointed across to the clump of ferns from which he had heard the cry of pain. They proceeded warily around the edge of the open.

Haddon was first. Very soon he stopped short and turned to Kenaston.

"Jove! You nicked him right enough. Plenty of blood here."

But the American had spied a dark object on the ground amid the crimson-spattered leaves.

"Ford's handkerchief!" he cried. "Lord! They did get him."

"Hm! Maybe," Haddon grunted. "Let's look."

Ten feet farther they came across Ford's body.

His glazed eyes stared up at the blue of heaven and the green of the jungle—unseeing. His feet were shoeless, and in his hand he gripped a long, smooth blow-pipe. There were two tiny bullet wounds in his breast.

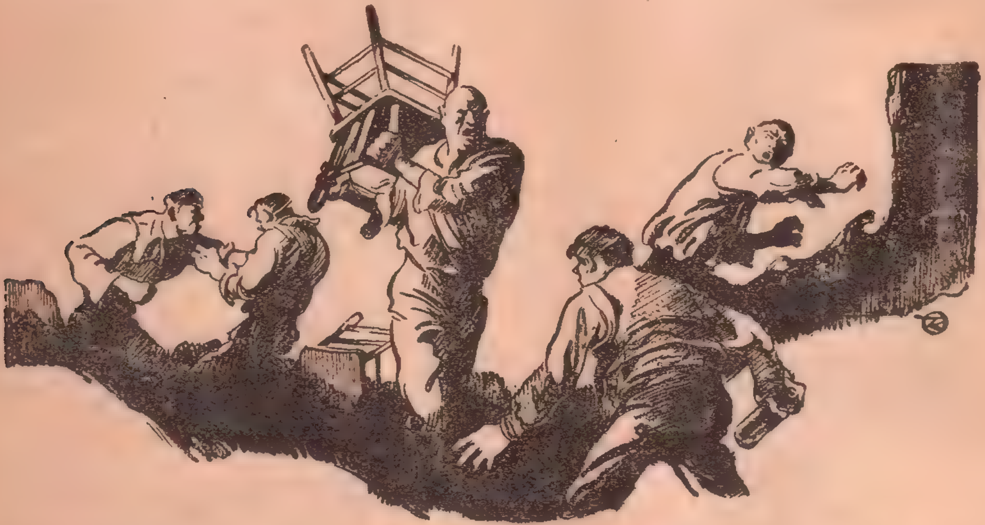
"But, my God! I don't understand!" The cry was torn from Kenaston's lips.

Haddon placed a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"It's what we expected, lad," he said, very kindly. "Half-shares wasn't enough for him. Didn't dare chance it with a .22, you see, so he bartered for a blow-gun; Mombo'd never know. You're almighty lucky, really."

He gazed for a long moment at the body, then looked away. His eyes were suddenly old and tired.

"Ay, lad," he went on, "Paradise feathers have their tragedies same as gold and pearls and all the rest."



THE COMMISSARY IN THE HILLS

A Complete Novelette by MAX BONTER

Author of "The Last Trip Down," "The Pal with the Number Twelves," etc.

AN EARLY morning local, shrieking its way up-grade through the Alleghany Mountains, checked its noisy course long enough to discharge at Drayton one passenger—a young man with a suit-case—who sat down upon his frail baggage and looked curiously over the wild and picturesque environment. It was a country of bald hills, slashed with deep glens and watered by purling streamlets. Over the jagged outlines of a scrub-capped precipice peeped the rising sun. A pure, sweet breeze blew softly over the hilltops.

The lone traveler emptied his lungs of the vile smoking-car atmosphere and drank deeply of the undefiled element about him.

"The Commissary in the Hills," copyright, 1922, by Max Bonter.

"What a change from Broadway!" he exclaimed, in grateful appreciation of surrounding nature. "But where the deuce is the camp?"

Drayton was merely a flag station—a shed-like structure beside the track designed apparently for the sinister employments of a colony of fat spiders. The young man was still sitting on his suit-case and trying to puzzle a way out of his bewilderment when he observed a lean, slouchy-looking individual moving leisurely toward him along the railroad track. The latter's glances strayed inquiringly over the newcomer's person and suit-case.

"Reckon y'u're the noo com's'ry—ain't y'u?" he ventured, deliberately soiling the shining ball of the rail with a jet of tobacco juice.

"I guess you're right," was the young man's prompt admission.

"Wal, th' camp's jist 'round that bend. I'm th' crum boss. I'll take y'u over an' interjooce y'u."

While his pilot slouched along beside him the new commissary clerk was vaguely wondering:

"'Crum boss'? What kind of a boss is that? What sort of an outfit have I butted into, anyway? Can't say I particularly admire the guy's looks, either. He doesn't impress me as being the proper type of man for a boss."

The railroad track curved about the base of a red limestone crag, beyond which a tiny plateau discovered itself. A short spur of track led out across the plateau from the main line and on the spur a small train of box-cars was standing. These cars appeared to have been reconstructed into dwellings and fitted up with some crude living conveniences, because stove-pipes could be seen sticking through the roofs and little square windows had been cut in the sides of the cars.

Three score overalled figures lounged about the camp. Some were smoking corn-cob pipes or cigarets, but the faces of all wore that unmistakable expression that succeeds the consumption of food. Aha! What was this odor borne suddenly along by the keen mountain breeze? A queer pang smote the new clerk below his belt. He sniffed.

"Liver and onions and fried potatoes," he audibly conjectured.

"I s'pose y'u're hungry atter y'ur ride," ventured the crum boss sympathetically. "Wal, y'u won't have long t' wait. Th' gang's already et. Y'u'll eat wit' th' cook an' th' flunkeys an' me."

There followed a minute's silence during which the men gradually neared the little encampment; but before they had arrived within ear-shot the crum boss remarked with an attempt at carelessness:

"Y'u're a noo guy here, so I might's well tip y'u off 'bout that hasher, Garvey. Don't say nuthin' 'bout what I'm tellin' y'u, but he had a run-in wit' th' other com's'ry an' chased 'im outa camp."

"He did, eh?" responded the clerk dryly. "Well, the thing I'm principally interested in right now is his hash—not his disposition. I'll eat first and get chased out afterwards."

A gaping wonder dawned on the crum boss' heavy face as he looked into the young man's twinkling eyes. Then, hunching his drooping shoulders into a shrug, he led the way into the dining-car.

"Th' noo com's'ry," he announced with the hangdog air of one utterly unfamiliar with social niceties.

"My name's Bolton," supplemented the new arrival, "Jack Bolton."

Three men seated at the breakfast table, grunting some half-intelligible words of greeting in acknowledgment of the crude introduction, proceeded with their meal. Bolton set down his suit-case and he and the crum boss added their persons to the gathering. The new clerk adopted an attitude of instant friendliness toward the victuals with which the camp table was liberally supplied. He filled his plate with the constituents of a substantial repast and devoured the liver and onions and fried potatoes and flapjacks and sirup with great gusto.

"Clerk," rumbled the big, gray-mustached man who sat at the head of the table, with a trace of insolence in his tone, "y'u brought along a purty good appetite, didn't y'u?"

The clerical man laid down his knife and fork, wiped his lips, sighed contentedly and then replied with a smile—

"Cook, I always do things that way."

Bill Garvey fixed his steel-gray eyes intently upon Bolton's while he pondered the significance of the remark.

"Make a clean-up, y'u mean?" he growled at length.

"Try to," admitted the clerk quietly. "Everything I tackle."

The two men continued looking across

the table at each other—the young, clear-eyed, white-collared, downy-cheeked clerk, and the old, grizzle-faced, rough-necked camp cook. The crum boss and the flunkeys seemed to be ill at ease. At last Bill Garvey lifted his big frame yawningly from the bench and grunted, with an accompanying wink at his flunkeys:

"Wal, I guess y'u'll have some cleanin' up t' do right away. Th' last clerk left here in a sorta hurry, an' things in th' com's'ry car ain't igzackly what y'u'd call tidy."

The flunkeys snickered.

"Very well—I'll tidy things up," returned the clerk composedly. "Is the place locked?"

Bill Garvey handed Bolton a key.

"I'll show y'u th' car," volunteered the crum boss.

The first box car of the string—in other words, the car that lay nearest the main line switch—proved to be the commissary car. Bolton unlocked the door and entered. In one end were a narrow bunk and a small desk. The remaining space was devoted entirely to the housing of supplies. The shelves were filled with canned goods of every description, as well as dried fruits, cereals and other varieties of foodstuffs. There were likewise boxes of tobacco, cigarets, shirts, overalls, socks, shoes, soap and many other requisites for the use of the gang. On the floor were bags of coffee, rice, beans, flour, vegetables, etc.

But—what a mess! Many of the bags and boxes had been overturned and much of their contents lay scattered over the dirty floor. The desk had been canted over upon its side. Pens, ink, pencils and blank forms littered the surrounding floor space. An expression of amazement came into Bolton's eyes.

"What the deuce happened here?" he muttered. "Has this car been in a wreck, or what?"

"Purty near a wreck, ain't it?" agreed the crum boss with a broad grin. "This is th' way th' other clerk left it atter him an' Garvey had it out. Th' clerk jist nachully couldn't leave this camp fast enough."

"But what was the trouble between them?" demanded Bolton pointedly.

"They jist nachully couldn't git along."

"Yes—but what seemed to be the chief difficulty?" persisted the clerk, directing a keen look into the other's shifty eyes.

The crum boss hesitated. After having spent some seconds in the rapid mastication of a fresh chew of tobacco he replied, looking uneasily about him:

"That's Garvey's way. He jist nachully can't git along wit' nobody—speshully a w'ite-collar guy."

"He can't, eh?" retorted Bolton scornfully. "Well, he'd better begin to learn how, because he'll have to get along with me."

"Y'u see," went on the crum boss confidentially, with his eyes on the floor, "th' clerk's s'posed t' run th' camp; but Garvey's idee is that th' cook runs it—see?"

Bringing this parley abruptly to an end, the new clerk threw off his coat and went to work to make the car presentable and habitable. The crum boss found himself suddenly in the way and a moment afterward took his departure.

"This 'crum boss,' as he calls himself, doesn't impress me very strongly," thought Bolton. "I think I'll like the cook better—he at least can look me in the eye."

JIM PIDGIN, the tall, raw-boned proprietor of the little mountain inn called the "Pidgin Coop," drew a glass of beer and served the big man who waited expectantly in front of the bar. Pidgin was on the lookout for trade.

"Y'u frum th' camp over thar?" he ventured, with a half-leer that was designed to represent a sociable smile.

"I'm th' cook," responded the customer shortly, gulping his beer and promptly ordering another.

The saloon-keeper was interested. He thoroughly inspected the culinary man's person and then drawled—

"Didn't git them flippers kneadin' dough —did y'u?"

Garvey spread his brawny, bare arms comfortably over the bar and lazily drank the second glass of beer.

"No—I didn't quite git 'em slingin' hash," he admitted, while a slight flicker of pride showed in his deep-set eyes.

"What's th' matter with all yore fellers over thar—don't they ever take a drink?" pursued Pidgin. "I see 'em goin' out t' work ev'ry day an' comin' back ag'in; but I don't ever see 'em comin' 'round t' buy a beer."

An amused twinkle wiped some of the surliness out of the big cook's gaze.

"Why," he explained, "th' outfit's only been here about ten days. These gandys only get paid once ev'ry two weeks. They ain't had a pay day since they've been here. They're all broke—savvy? So y'u think a gandy don't drink?"

Garvey laughed suddenly. It was a roaring, good-natured guffaw that made the little bar-room tremble.

"Wait till pay day," he prophesied, after his mirth had died away.

Pidgin was determined to get acquainted.

"How many men y'u got in camp?" he persisted.

"About sixty."

"An y'u're feedin' sixty men, b' gosh!" Pidgin reflectively stroked his stubbly chin. "Must use a lot o' grub!"

He refilled Garvey's glass and waved a deprecatory hand at the proffered nickel.

"I s'pose," went on the knowledge-seeking saloon man, "th' cumpny sends y'u out a lot o' grub—more'n y'u need sometimes, mebbe?"

Garvey sipped his beer, listened and was silent. Encouraged by the cook's silence, Pidgin continued:

"I figger on havin' a gang o' woodchoppers in frum th' woods purty soon. Awful appetites, them fellers. Any time y'u got more stock'n y'u need, mebbe——"

Garvey still tantalizingly held his peace.

"—I could take a little offen y'u, pervided yore price ain't too steep," finished Pidgin at last.

The cook's intellectual processes were not slow and they grasped at once the significance of the saloon man's proposal. It was in fact an invitation to Garvey to do a little grafting at the company's expense. By making his commissary requisitions a trifle bigger and cutting down his table allowances to the men, a stock surplus could readily be acquired that he could turn into cash. The cook, being a blunt man, promptly declared himself.

"I ain't a petty larceny guy," he replied shortly.

"Now y'u're hittin' th' wrong trail, pardner," expostulated Pidgin, coloring somewhat nevertheless. "I mean a l'i'l' deal on th' level."

"O, 'scuse me," grinned Garvey. "But it happens that I ain't th' boss—ixept in me own kitchen. I draw th' grub frum th' com's'ry clerk, an' I give th' gandys ev'ry pound that I draw. Whatever other failin's I've got, by ——, they can't call me a belly-robber!"

The saloon-keeper dropped the subject, and the cook, having finished drinking his beer, abruptly left the saloon and returned to camp.

A CRANE—the commissary company's runner who had charge of all the camps—came to Drayton to take stock.

"Your stuff checks all right," he assured Bolton. "I understand you're a new man, Sonny, and I'm going to put you hep to a few things."

The runner lit a cigaret and sprawled with a comfortable air of proprietorship upon Bolton's bunk.

"You're in charge of the camp. You'll issue to Garvey whatever he calls for in the line of grub. Don't butt directly into his kitchen business—that's his end of the game—unless he gets soused. In that event it's up to you to see that the gang eats, and it's your own business how you go about it. If Garvey doesn't snap out of the booze at once, it's your privilege to telegraph for another cook. You'll find him an 'A number one' hasher, but a mean customer to get mixed up with in case he gets sore at you."

"In case he gets sore at me?" repeated the clerk indignantly. "Why, he met me with a grouch—first time I saw him."

Bolton looked the runner squarely in the eyes.

"Now, Crane," he demanded, "why should any man get sore at me, even before he knows me?"

The runner exhaled a cloud of cigaret smoke luxuriously through his nose, gazed reflectively at the glowing end of the little cylinder, and then a sophisticated smile grew about the corners of his mouth.

"Sonny," he replied with a patient shrug, "the reason harks us back to the very foundations of society—even before the stone age—when certain gorillas began to wear gee-strings and rings through their noses in order to distinguish themselves from other gorillas."

"Class, you mean?" queried Bolton understandingly. "Why, I'm not aware that I put on any airs."

"These hard-boiled old chaws," went on Crane, "simply do not love a white-collar guy."

"What have *I* done to incur their animosity?"

"That's not the question. If one of them happens to drift into a city office where you are employed, if you're a stenographer, you'll stop stenogging a minute, or if you're ledger-keeper, you'll stop ledgering a minute, until you take a pike at this bird's awkwardness and his funny clothes. In a strange environment and with numbers against him, he feels like a fish trying to navigate dry land. The chaw remembers this; and when you leave your typewriter or your ledger and come out to *his* country—a country of rocks and rough-house, picks and shovels, hard fists and hard liquor—he feels that *you* ought to pause and flounder and back out of the picture, the same as *he* did when he was in *your* country."

Crane rose, yawned and threw away the butt of his cigaret.

"Why do they call these men 'gandy dancers'?" asked the clerk suddenly.

"I've never been able to find out just why. Some old-timers claim there's an Irish dance called the 'gandy' that looks about like the antics of two trackmen working as partners and tamping up a tie with their feet on their shovels."

"Well, what's a crum boss?"

Crane chuckled.

"This camp lingo's a puzzler, eh? Why, the crum boss is the camp chore boy—cleans out the cars, makes up the men's bunks and looks after the fires in cold weather."

"I think I understand the term now," replied the clerk with a grin. "Isn't crum a sort of slang allusion to an unmentionable species of vermin that often propagates in men's clothing and blankets? If so, in this case, I must say——"

"You mean," prompted the runner laughingly, "that in this case the term is appropriate?"

"Maybe he'll improve on acquaintance," said Bolton generously.

"Yes, you've sure got a strange assortment of humanity to deal with, sonny. You've happened to strike about the toughest camp in the line. If you can clean it up and get it in working order—but I hadn't better do so much gassing. I've got to catch my train. You'll plug your way through all right, because you've got the get-there look in your eye. You might need a little strong-arm diplomacy; but if ever things get *too* raw, just drop me an S. O. S. along the line. I'll pick it up somewhere and run over to help you out. Goodby and good luck!"

As the days passed Bolton endeavored to arrive at a proper understanding of the big cook, although he found it hard to penetrate the latter's crust of grouchiness. Garvey owned a strong vein of nervous energy that throbbed unceasingly in him, although this energy found outlet for the most part in his work. Garvey could cook. That fact was patent. The gandy dancers' simple ration he manipulated as if by magic into victuals that were little short of delicious. The clerk determined to do his utmost toward dwelling in amity with Garvey. He felt instinctively, however, that there was a sleeping devil in the man; and the approaching pay-day gave him additional grounds for uneasiness, inasmuch as the big cook was reputed to be very ugly when drink possessed him.

"Pay-day," muttered Bolton while going to bed on the evening before that eventful day, "somehow that word hath an ominous sound."

"TH' PAY train's here!"

Slade, the crum boss, came bounding into camp with the news.

"Got mine!" he shouted gleefully. "Th' gandys is gittin' paid now!"

Slade waved a roll of bills exultantly in the air and almost immediately disappeared in the direction of the Pidgin Coop. That evening only half the gang sat down to supper. The others, galvanized into activity by the Power that had come suddenly into their overalls pockets, had departed without eating in quest of such excitements as the mountain saloon was able to offer.

Jim Pidgin was thunderstruck by the sudden influx of moneyed patrons. Thirty or forty gandy dancers formed a solid phalanx of booze-fighting humanity in front of his bar and commanded instant assuagement of the thirst that consumed them.

"Hey, Jack! This is on *me!*"

"Nix! I'm buyin' this roun'. Take it outa here, bartenner."

"Hey, y'u! Ain't my kale no good?"

"Two boozes an' two beers, Mac, an' a coupla good *see*gars. Make it snappy!"

"Hey! Can't a guy buy a drink in dis joint? I ain't had one fer de las' five minutes!"

The saloon-keeper began rushing dazedly about in an effort to fill the complex office of change-making, decanter-filling and glass-rinsing. The last of these he quickly dispensed with, as being the least necessary. He scented the gandys' determination to arrive at the state of drunkenness as speedily as possible, and it occurred to his thrifty soul that dirty glasses would produce the result quite as effectively as clean ones. Likewise, in the first of the mentioned functions he soon began to be tardy; and whenever one of the gandys who retained enough wits to observe the shortage began to clamor for his change, Pidgin would promptly apologize and fall back upon the excuse that, being alone, he could not help occasionally overlooking such trifles.

Notwithstanding this simplification of his labors, however, such a continuous torrent of expostulation and exhortation surged over the bar that Pidgin was at last compelled to impress one of his stable-hands into auxiliary bar service. Bills of all denominations, held to their places by little piles of silver change, lay in scattered carelessness over the bar; and the bumpkins' eyes and hands were so affected by the sight that their clumsy ministrations served to impede rather than to aid the headlong rush of the gandy dancers into intoxication, although, notwithstanding this handicap, they seemed to be nearing the desired goal quickly enough.

In the midst of the uproar a man who towered head and shoulders above the throng elbowed his way determinedly through the rear rank and began pounding imperatively upon the bar with a huge fist, demanding instant recognition by virtue of his size and station.

"Gimme a li'l' licker, Pidgin," he rumbled with a surly grin. "Didn't I give y'u th' right dope about a gandy pay-day?"

The harassed saloon-keeper set out a decanter and glass—scarcely, however, withdrawing his fascinated eyes from the piles of currency that lay pleading for expenditure around him. Business? Phew! During all his experience—not even when the woodchoppers came out of the woods—his little hostelry had never suffered such an insistent bombardment as this!

Slade, the crum boss—clinging to the bar with both hands to keep himself from sliding into the scuppers, nevertheless blinked and stared and nudged a gandy dancer with whom he was drinking.

"Gryshe, ju shee Big Bill hittin' th' red-eye? W'never Bill starsh off like that heesh gittin' prim' fer drunk!"

"That means," said the crum boss's companion—a hard-eyed, ghoulish-faced fellow who stood his drink well—"that th' w'ite-collar stiff in th' com's'ry'll git *his*. I unnerstan' he made brags he was gonna clean up th' camp. Garvey'll clean *him* up—hey?"

SEEKING to determine the extent of the cyclone-like devastation wrought by pay-day, at an early hour on the following morning Bolton inspected camp. Garvey—a strange glitter discernible in his steel-gray eyes—was nevertheless on the job and getting the men their breakfast. Further investigation, however, disclosed the fact that preparing breakfast for the gang was an almost needless accomplishment.

The gandy dancers? Bolton smiled at what he saw in the bunk cars. The breakfast gong drew from them merely grunts of indifference or ejaculations of disgust. About a dozen stumbled tardily to the mess table and managed to swallow a flapjack or two; but the others—those who still had money—went instead to the Pidgin Coop. Slade the crum boss, who had been absent all night, staggered into camp about nine o'clock and fell helpless across his bunk. His duties were being much neglected. Bolton reluctantly realized that the time for exerting his authority was at hand. He found Slade in a drunken stupor and shook him vigorously.

"Get up and sweep those cars and make up the bunks!" he commanded.

The crum boss strangled a snore, twisted his neck lazily about on the pillow and blinked resentfully upward.

"Whassat?" he grunted in a ludicrous attempt at derision. "Whassat y'u shay?"

The clerk struggled with and conquered an intense desire to laugh. He caught Slade by the collar and yanked him out of the bunk. Slade staggeringly adopted the crouch of battle and the utmost seriousness leaped from his bloodshot eyes.

"Do your work or get off the job," snapped Bolton. "I'm not cheap enough to hit a drunk."

"Thashall ri'," muttered the inebriate. "Wanna make a en'my outa me, hey? Thashall ri'."

"I must say I prefer your enmity to your friendship," said the clerk candidly.

He continued his cleaning-up operations by breaking up a riotous "bunk party" of gandy dancers.

"These cars and bunks are to sleep in—not to make hog-pens out of," he said sharply. "If you want to get drunk again, go back to the saloon."

"Who th' —— give y'u all th' 't'or'ty 'round here, anyway?" demanded a hard-faced drunkard named Gryce. "W'at's a w'ite-collar stiff like y'u got on us guys, hey?"

"I don't quarrel, Gryce," said the clerk quietly.

"Haw! haw! haw!" guffawed Gryce, his fellow rioters following suit.

"But," continued Bolton without the slightest trace of anger on his face, walking over and standing close to Gryce and looking directly into the gandy dancer's eyes, "that doesn't mean that I don't fight."

The gandy was considerably taken aback.

"Oh—they's a diffrunce, is they?" he parried.

"I believe there is—quite a difference."

Gryce did not like the lightning in the clerk's eyes. He decided to refrain from making the challenge that quivered on his lips and, shrugging his shoulders, he slouched away toward the Pidgin Coop.

"Well, that's two 'enemies' so far—with Garvey a probable third," said the clerk to himself. "I'll get them lined up after a while."

IT WAS Garvey's turn to balk. Work and whisky seldom harmonize, as was evident when his alcoholic outburst assumed greater proportions. He took his flunkeys over to the mountain saloon and all three returned to camp an hour before supper time and flopped immediately upon their bunks to enjoy a post-bibulative snooze. The kitchen fire was out and not a sign of culinary activity was discernible in the cook-car. Soon the workers would come marching grimly in from their track toil and find naught but an empty mess-table in lieu of the horn of plenty.

Bolton was dismayed at the prospect, but he concealed his perturbation under the mask of a resolute chin and determined eyes. One glance at the burly frame of Garvey, lying "in heavy marching order" on his bunk, was sufficient to eliminate him from the immediate scheme of cookery. One bare and brawny arm was twisted under his thick neck and his long gray mustache straggled up around his nostrils, disclosing a sleepy sneer on his lips. The neck of a liquor flask peeped from beneath the pillow.

"A sleeping devil," muttered Bolton, backing cautiously away.

He found the two flunkeys in much the same condition, although one of them was sufficiently conscious to muster up a curse at the clerk's scrutiny.

"Useless," concluded the latter. "Utterly useless. The staff is out of commission."

Bolton fished an idea out of his sea of difficulties and went down the track in search of the foreman, whom he found attempting to badger some work out of his sadly-depleted laboring force.

"A cook, eh?" he repeated in response to the clerk's query. "Garvey soused ag'in? 'Tain't th' fust time, t' my knowlidge. Wal, thar's Stutt'rin' Sims—I dunno ef y'u kin git him t' butt into Garvey's job, though. Garvey's 'bout got 'em all bluffed. But Sims usta be a hasher, an' th' gang's sure got t' eat. Hey, Sims!"

A mild-eyed young man threw down his tamping shovel, leisurely detached himself from the little knot of gandy dancers and sauntered up in obedience to the foreman's command. Bolton tersely explained his predicament, doubt meanwhile clouding Sims's brow.

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-c-course——" he began.

"Never mind," said the clerk sympathetically, noting the man's vocal impediment. "Do the best you can. I'll help you."

Sims reluctantly followed Bolton back to camp and the twain invaded Garvey's culinary stronghold.

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-c-course——" began the impromptu cook again.

He turned a faltering gaze upon Bolton. A sonorous, rasping noise could be distinctly heard emanating from the big man's sleeping quarters.

"I'll take care of you, Sims," promised the clerk quietly, suspecting the cause of his hesitation.

Sims somewhat dubiously surveyed Bolton's physical proportions. The clerk was a well set-up young fellow, but he was only half as big as Garvey; and moreover the big cook in action was reputed to be really formidable. Just then one of the flunkeys stumbled into view, brushing the booze-mist out of his eyes and looking half-contemptuously at the clerk.

"Get on the job!"

The sudden and unexpected command held a whip-like note. The flunkey blinked, stared a moment into the clerk's stern eyes, flashed an instinctively appealing glance in the direction of Garvey's sleeping quarters and then, finding Bolton's gaze still fastened upon him, he swallowed a half-uttered retort and began to make some show of attending to his duties.

That piece of psychology decided Sims. Presently there was a great rattle of pots and pans in the gandy dancers' kitchen; Bolton built a fire in the stove; the fast-sobering flunkey began to set the tables; it soon began to be evident that the hungry trackmen would have some supper.

Suddenly the sleeping devil awoke. The unmistakable din of culinary affairs had penetrated to his submerged consciousness. He staggered to his feet, passed a broad hand over his feverish brow and then, scenting the trespass that had taken place, he strode to the kitchen doorway. Bolton and Sims saw the devil at the same moment. It was as though every human lineament had been suddenly erased from the countenance of a big, broad-shouldered man, and brute eyes, brute lips and brute teeth painted in instead. Reason had gone out and insensate rage had entered in. Garvey's forehead seemed somehow to have acquired a gorilla-like slant. He was brutal, beastly—a human being temporarily stripped of his rank by the force of his own passions.

Sims shrank backward. Bolton was very pale, but he stepped resolutely in front of Sims and faced Garvey.

"Git out o' my kitchen!"

It was more like a bull's bellow than a man's voice. The devil did not wait for obedience to his furious command. He rushed blindly toward Bolton and Sims, seeking to engulf both men at the same instant. That reckless maneuver proved the key to his downfall. The cool, sober mind of Bolton was illumined by a lightning-like flash of confidence. This drunken two hundred weight of flesh falling unsteadily toward him, inspired by an excess of alcoholic confidence—why——

Crack!

The clerk had refused to become excited. Instead, he had given his body a quarter of a revolution and put all his driving force behind his lean right arm. The said arm had sped skilfully upward between Garvey's circling appendages, and the *crack!* was the signal of impact between Bolton's hard-driven right fist and Garvey's exposed chin.

"Go ahead with the supper, Sims."

Sims stood, open-mouthed, looking first at the clerk and then at Garvey. The big cook seemed to have fallen to the lowest depths of bewilderment. While reason seeped slowly back into his brain he tried vainly to solve the riddle of his sudden fall. Instead of clerk and rival cook fleeing before his mad wrath as in days gone by when trespass upon his domain had provoked him to similar action—what did he see? Bolton calmly directing Sims to go ahead with the cookery as if nothing in the least exciting had occurred—paying not even the slightest attention to him. He—Bill Garvey—the dean of the fighting cooks—the culinary autocrat of the whole line—lying on the floor—knocked cold by a clerk!

Garvey got again upon his feet, but smothered the roar of defiance that rose to his lips and contented himself with glaring at the proceedings. Sims calmly slid a pan of new-made hash into the oven and the clerk deliberately turned his back upon Garvey and began stoking the fire. The frightened flunkey, fast returning to sobriety, took his instructions from Bolton. Garvey thrice opened his mouth in an effort toward invective; but the strong profanity that boiled within him somehow could not come out. The complete usurpation of all his prerogatives had stricken him speechless.

"Send fer me relief," he rumbled at last after his emotions had found voice.

There was a queer look in the big man's eyes as he turned about and shambled unsteadily back to his bunk. He thrust his huge frame viciously under the blankets—shoes, clothing and all—yanked the whisky bottle from beneath his pillow, flipped out the cork with his thumb-nail, gulped half a pint of the strong liquor at a draught, and then—staring straight ahead a moment with bloodshot eyes before oblivion claimed him—he muttered—

"Bill Garvey's a-goin' t' git even!"

"SLADE, we gotta gyp this teetot'lin' w'ite-collar stiff somehow. Make him emigrate, hey? Th' outfit ain't a home fer a rummy no more."

"How y'u gonna do it, Gryce? Th' guy's

got ev'rybody guessin' atter th' way he handled Garvey."

"Aw, nix on th' movie stuff—I mean *git* him. Git him *right*," went on Gryce venomously.

Jim Pidgin served the crum boss and his companion with more liquor. A cunning, whisky-born scheme had begun to grow in Gryce's evil brain. It was two days after pay-day, but he and Slade were still drinking, although the rest of the gandy dancers were broke after their fierce jamboree and had gone back to the track to their labor.

Some had spent their money; others had fallen victims to Pidgin's short-changing while they were drunk; still others had fallen prey to camp plunderers, who had picked their pockets while they slept. Slade and Gryce for some reason still had money. They stood alone in the barroom of the Pidgin Coop and Pidgin's avaricious fingers closed fast over the dimes that they put forth in exchange for his cheap liquor. Honest money or otherwise—it all clinked the same in the ears of Jim Pidgin.

Gryce's voice had dropped to a whisper and he was talking earnestly to the crum boss.

"Sounds purty raw, Gryce," objected Slade uneasily. "I gotta think it over."

"Raw?" sneered Gryce. "It's th' neates' way o' gittin' back at him, ain't it? He's signed up fer th' junk an' he's responsible fer it. Th' cumpny'll jist nachully think he peddled it hisself, because they's lots o' these com's'ry stiffs that peddles their own outfits an' then beats it—don't y'u know that?"

At this point Pidgin thrust himself into the conversation and turned Gryce's liquory eloquence into a new channel.

"So th' big feller got licked, eh?" he inquired curiously, leaning familiarly over the bar. "How come?"

"Stewed," replied Gryce. "Th' kid pasted Bill when Bill wasn't expectin' it. If Bill Garvey'd been half-sober he'd have picked that teetot'lin' kid up by th' ears an' spit in his eye an' drownded him—eh, Slade? Bill ain't troo wit' him yet, anyway. Bill Garvey don't never fergit."

"Did yore noo cook come yit?"

"Hit camp at noon. Looks like a rummy."

"Bring 'im over," grinned Pidgin.

When the two men returned to camp their red faces and unsteady gait told the secret of their absence. Bolton had something to say to them and he said it without preamble.

"Gryce, you haven't worked for three days. If you don't start in you'll have to leave camp. We're boarding working men —not loafers."

"Aw, how d' y'u git that way?" snarled the gandy dancer. "I'm payin' me board same as anybody else, ain't I? Y'u ain't got no 't'or'ty t' fire a guy, either."

"I can't fire you, but I can close up your board account."

Gryce choked back a curse and started for the dining-car.

"Slade," continued the clerk sternly, "I've already warned you about neglecting your work. If you don't snap out of it I'll put a man in your place."

The crum boss avoided Bolton's eyes and followed Gryce.

"*Now* what d' y'u say?" demanded the latter in a savage whisper. "Are y'u game t' clip this bird's wings afore he gits y'u, or not?"

"We gotta have help," parried the crum boss uncertainly. "Us two blokes ain't nuff t' pull th' stunt off."

"I'll fix that, y'u boob. I'll git a line on this new hasher. He stacks up like a rummy an' he looks queer. He won't git along wit' this teetot'lin' w'ite-collar stiff nohow. I'll steer him over t' th' Coop an' put a coupla charges under his belt. That'll loosen him up. These hashers is lookin' fer graft same as anybody else."

Meanwhile Garvey had gone to the city to report to headquarters for a settlement of his account and for assignment to another camp. His exceptional cookery covered a multitude of personal shortcomings. The man whom the company had sent to Drayton to succeed him was a ferret-eyed person named Joe Beehan, whose predilection for more than one half of one per cent. refreshment was amply attested to by the red varicose veins that branched from his proboscis to his cheek bones. Bolton felt an instant dislike of Beehan. There was something snaky about the fellow that inspired distrust. He slapped the clerk familiarly on the back.

"Y'u'll find me a good feller t' git along wit', Bolton," he said reassuringly. "I ain't like th' other feller—Garvey."

The new cook offered to share with Bolton a pint of liquor that he had brought along in his suit case, but the clerk declined the proffered pledge of friendship.

"I don't drink on the job," he said shortly.

Beehan drank alone and then proceeded to raise a portentous clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen. All his noisy application, however, when judged by the concrete culinary result, appeared to signify little. The gandy dancers grumbled loudly at the first meal he set before them. Their appetites had returned three-fold after the effects of their recent debauch had worn away. But, alas! Their palates, educated to a high degree of exaction under the Garvey régime, were suddenly confronted with the clumsy, food-mangling ministrations of Beehan.

"Good Lord!" murmured Bolton in dismay when he looked over the sorry mess that the new cook called a meal. "The gang'll lynch him if he keeps up that gait!"

THREE tall bottles stood on a shelf in the cook-car. They contained respectively lemon extract, vanilla extract and egg coloring, the three strong alcoholic infusions that form the flavoring basis of the simple art of camp cookery. The clerk had issued them to Garvey only a couple of days prior to his departure. Garvey had not had occasion to use much of the extract, but now—

"Great guns!" exclaimed Bolton to himself. "What can the fellow be doing with all that extract? Why, the quart of lemon is already half gone!"

Sims afforded the desired enlightenment because that evening, when he entered the commissary to buy tobacco, the clerk enquired—

"Sims, did you use any of that lemon extract?"

The gandy dancer shook his head in prompt negative. Then, noticing Bolton's puzzled demeanor and realizing the new clerk's greenness about certain matters that appertained to a gandy dancers' camp, he suggested mildly—

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-c-course, there's some c-c-c-c-c-c-cooks that d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d——"

The clerk took a short cut to knowledge, at the same time helping Sims out of his articulative flounderings.

"What! You don't mean they *drink* it?" he demanded in astonishment.

Sims' nod and accompanying grin solved the enigma. Bolton surmised at once that Beehan, who was probably broke and getting over the effects of a city spree, after having drunk his pint of whisky had resorted to the extract to soothe his jumping nerves. On the following morning his suppositions were crystallized into certainties by the pronounced lemon-aura that invested Beehan's person. The cook's eyes were dull; the varicose web-work about his nose was fiery red; he moved about like a man under the influence of a drug. Bolton remarked that the ravaged bottle had been refilled with a pale liquid. During a minute of Beehan's absence he tasted it and found, as he had conjectured, that it was only water. He noticed also that the bottle of vanilla likewise had been attacked.

"The fool will kill himself if he tackles that egg coloring," thought Bolton. "What the deuce shall I do?"

The gandy dancers were already roaring for a new cook, because it had become evident to the most feeble comprehension that the extract-guzzling, food-mutilating Beehan could not be tolerated long in his present capacity. The potatoes that he dished out to appease the gaunt gandys were usually half-cooked; his bread was either close to the status of dough or scorched to a semblance of charcoal; his beans were simply indigestible; his "Java" suffered much by comparison with ooze from the bottom of the fabled Styx. How they missed the master hand of Garvey!

Beehan suddenly stopped drinking the extract, which afforded relief to Bolton. At the peak of his disgust, however, the clerk had written to headquarters as follows:

Drayton, Pa., Aug. 23.
Metropolitan Commissary Company,
New York.
Gentlemen:

Please ship at once one dozen quarts of extracts, assorted, for beverage purposes. Also please state maximum daily ration of same allowable to one cook.

Respectfully,
J. Bolton.

The clerk had not wished to write a formal denunciation of Beehan, but trusted to the manager's acumen to decipher between the lines the true condition of affairs at the Drayton camp. Now, while Beehan no longer drank extract, he nevertheless remained as alcoholic and as incapable of culinary duty as before. Added to this, Bolton was especially uneasy over the heavy issues of supplies that Beehan required. He drew at least one-third more of all staple commodities than Garvey; and yet the resultant victuals that reached the gandy dancers' table and evoked their condemnation were easily one-third less!

Stuttering Sims once again fished Bolton out of the sea of ignorance.

"How is it humanly possible to waste so much good food, Sims?" queried the clerk, in the last stage of exasperation. "And how can a cook keep drunk without money or extract?"

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-c-course," began the gandy dancer deprecatingly, using the expression as a thought-balancer before beginning his onerous task of delivering an idea, "I ain't a stool—p-p-p-p-p-p-p-p-p-p——"

Bolton shot a keen look into Sims' mild and innocent eyes.

"—igeon," ground out the stutterer at last.

He paused, looking significantly at the clerk.

Bolton, drumming reflectively on the edge of his desk with nervous fingers, finally pushed a box of cigars toward Sims, selected and lighted a weed himself, locked up his commissary and walked up into the hills. At the top of a rocky escarpment that rose on one side of the pathway to the Pidgin Coop, he secreted himself. Dusk was falling swiftly over the landscape; but before it had completely rubbed out the visibility of things beneath, the clerk descried some distant figures coming along the pathway. Three, he finally counted. Each of them seemed to be carrying a bundle. As they passed by Bolton's hiding place, fifty feet below, a sudden blasphemous outburst punctured the evening stillness.

"Slade—I thought so," muttered the clerk to himself.

"Gryce," he supplemented a moment later when another voice arose in angry criticism of the crum boss' outcry. Gryce was evidently the brains of the villainy. Bolton was already aware of the evil influence the gandy dancer exercised over the weak-kneed crum boss. And the third member of the party? Why, Beehan, the cook, of course! The reason why he had stopped drinking the extract was now quite clear. With sixty men to feed, and drawing a daily ration that was competent under good handling to feed eighty, he had nevertheless been providing food that was scarcely sufficient for the needs of forty. Under this system he was thus enabled to peddle half his entire drawings.

"No wonder he can buy booze!" exclaimed Bolton grimly. "I'd like to know how he happened to get in with that rotten bunch so soon. Well, I've got to clean this gang out somehow."

Sitting in the sweet mountain air and looking perplexedly at the lights of the little camp below, the harassed young clerk thought out his problem. Nearly three-score honest working-men being consistently robbed of their subsistence by a miserable drunken sneak posing as a cook, two petty scoundrels and a conniving saloon-keeper. Faugh! The clerk acquired a sudden respect for Garvey.

Crane's instructions to Bolton required the latter to issue to the cook whatever commodities were called for. This string to his authority was instrumental in bringing him to an immediate decision upon the matter that confronted him.

"I'll send an S. O. S. to Crane," he concluded. "This is more than a one-man job."

The nearest telegraph office was at Hillcrest, a town ten miles north. It was eight o'clock and he could get a train at eight-thirty. Bolton returned immediately to the camp and sought Sims.

"I've got to go to Hillcrest, Sims," he announced to the gandy dancer. "May not be able to get back before morning. I'd feel easier if you'd sleep in the commissary car. There's over a thousand dollars' worth of stuff in there. You're a man I'm not afraid to trust."

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-c-course," began Sims in a hesitating way.

"Thanks," returned Bolton with a smile, handing him the key. "The door is padlocked on the outside. There's no inside lock, but you won't need one, because you'll be inside yourself."

Sims heaved a reluctant sigh and took the key. His unfortunate impediment was bringing him unwished-for responsibilities.

The clerk was not called upon to flag the train. It stopped at Drayton to discharge one passenger—a big-boned, rough-looking man who wore knee boots.

"Whar'bouts is Jim Pidgin's?" he asked Bolton.

The clerk paused long enough on the car steps to direct him, before the train pulled out. The stranger stumbled over the unfamiliar road through the darkness in the direction of the glimmer of light that came from the Pidgin Coop.

"Jist got in, boys. Feller gittin' on th' train with a w'ite choker on tol' me whar t' come."

The newcomer shook hands with a couple of woodchoppers and ordered whisky. The incident of having been directed on his way by a white-collar man had lingered in his memory—white collars being largely anomalous to the back woods, and therefore memorable. The woodchopper referred again to the incident, amid some good-natured curses and the clinking of glasses. Pidgin was doing business. Half a dozen woodsmen were drinking at one end of the bar and Gryce, Slade and Beehan stood slopping at the other. Gryce, having overheard the stranger's remarks, pricked up his ears. He nudged both Slade and Beehan.

"Did y'u hear that, youse guys?" he whispered. "They's only one bloke that sports a w'ite choker in these jungles, an' that's th' com's'ry clerk. He musta gone t' town. They ain't no train back afore mornin'. Now's our chance t' pull th' trick—hey?"

The trio of food thieves exchanged glances. Gryce ordered more whisky. He took Pidgin aside and talked to him in an undertone.

"Looks purty raw," objected the saloonkeeper. "I ain't aimin' on gittin' 'quainted wit' th' perlice."

"Bah! Y'u're buyin' th' stuff from th' cook hisself, ain't y'u? That lets y'u out."

"Drink up, Jim!" bawled one of the proprietor's cronies. " 'Nuther one a-comin'!"

Pidgin reached over, lifted his newly filled glass of liquor from the bar and tossed it off. The fire of avarice began to burn still more brightly in his eyes.

"I'll come down an' look it over," he promised Gryce at last.

FOUR o'clock in the morning brought a sharp knock on the gang foreman's car door.

"Wreck?" he grumbled, jumping hastily out of his bunk and opening the door to admit the knocker.

"The commissary car is stolen."

"Suff'rin' cats!" was the boss' astonished exclamation. "How come, clerk?"

"There's been thieving going on for some time. Beehan seems to be in with Gryce and Slade. His drawings have been exceptionally heavy. I saw them carrying bundles last night in the direction of the Pidgin Coop. I took the eight-thirty to Hillcrest to wire to Crane. Got back at three this morning, and the whole car was gone. Sims was to sleep in the car till I returned. No trace of Sims, Gryce, Slade or Beehan in their bunks. I got a lantern from the cook-car and went down the track. The derail is off, the switch thrown on to the spur. I picked up two pinch bars at the cross road below the bend on the main line. Marks of a wagon's wheels and horses' hooves in the soft earth by the side of the road. Some flour and rice on the ground—leaked out of the bags, probably."

The foreman lighted the lamp in his car and turned a serious face to Bolton.

"Y'u sure got trouble, ain't y'u, clerk?" he sympathized. "Wal, I've heerd that feller Pidgin's a tough character. Usta be a woodchopper afore he went in fer easy money. Stands in wit' th' woods bunch. It's a bad part o' th' State, up here. Some of 'em git away wit' murder. That Gryce is a bad egg, too. There was a cuttin' in a camp two year ago that he was mixed up in; but they didn't have enough evidence ag'in him an' he got away wit' it. Sims knowed that because Sims was workin' in th' same camp at th' time. Sims is afeerd o' that feller. I don't know much about th' noo hasher, but——"

Here the grizzled old foreman's eyes flashed with indignation.

"—ef he's anythin' like his grub, he's sure rotten."

"How did they get the tools?"

"Th' crum boss carries th' key t' th' tool box. It's part o' his job t' git th' tools out fer th' gang ev'ry mornin' an' lock 'em up ev'ry night. Th' switch key an' derail key was hangin' inside th' box. He knowed that. What puzzles me is, what become o' th' car? Reckon they wouldn't have been crazy enough t' turn it loose—it must have got away frum 'em on th' grade."

The foreman had meanwhile pulled on his overalls and shoes.

"I'll run over t' Hillcrest in th' speeder an' notify th' operator," he decided. "Th' operator kin wire along th' line. Want me t' notify th' perlice?"

"There's a detachment of constabulary at Hillcrest, isn't there?" inquired Bolton. "Maybe you'd better notify them, because it's bound to be a police job."

Five minutes later the swift gasoline speeder was flying northward.

"HA! HA! HA! The young fellow at Drayton has got a sense of humor, eh? Danged if he hasn't! Orders a dozen quarts of extracts for beverage purposes—asks for maximum daily ration allowable to one cook! Pretty good. Well—this is Beehan's last chance with us. There's been the same complaint about him in every camp we've sent him to."

The manager of the Metropolitan Commissary Company swung briskly about in his swivel chair and roared—

"Any cooks out there?"

Without waiting for a response he jumped up and opened the door leading to the anteroom, where cooks and flunkeys were accustomed to congregate while awaiting assignment. At that moment the room held only one occupant—a big, broad-shouldered man with an iron-gray mustache who sat idly twisting the same between his thick fingers.

"Why, Garvey! What in —— is the matter?"

"Nuthin's th' matter—that I know of," rumbled Big Bill, fixing his steel-gray eyes in furtive interrogation upon those of his employer.

The manager still stared.

"Bill, how long have you cooked for us?"

"Goin' on ten years."

"Bill, it's the first time you ever came in without getting drunk. Are you sick, Bill—or broke—or what? You surely can't be broke—we only paid you off day before yesterday."

"I ain't sick an' I ain't broke—I'm lookin' fer a job."

"I've only got *one* job this morning—Drayton."

"That's jist where I wanta go."

"Why, Garvey! You just came from there!"

"An' I wanta go back."

For some seconds the manager continued looking keenly into the rugged face of his old cook.

"Bill—what's on your mind?" he demanded suspiciously at last.

"Nuthin'—ixept that I wanta go back t' me old job at Drayton," persisted Garvey doggedly.

"Well, well! Wonders will never cease! Bill Garvey in New York—cold sober—wants to go back on the job again without even getting drunk! However, there's no hurry for a day or so, Bill. I expect Crane in tomorrow or next day. You can go back with him tomorrow night or next night on Number Three. But——"

"What?"

"Don't get drunk."

"I ain't drinkin'," growled Garvey surlily, with a peculiar gleam in his steel-gray eyes.

"WE WANT a squar' meal—an' we don't work till we git it!"

After a meager breakfast concocted of scraps that the flunkeys had collected from the cook-car, the men had adopted the foregoing slogan. They shouted it harshly at the assistant foreman when he blew his whistle summoning them forth to their day's labor. He resorted to argument; but the gang had consolidated into a unit upon that question and they flatly refused to lift a pick or a shovel until their grievance had been adjusted. One glance around the circle of set faces convinced the "straw boss" that the men were in earnest. The gandys had organized. Knowing something of herd nature, the straw wisely dropped his attempts at coercion and decided to await the foreman's return.

"I don't see what youse guys has got ag'in th' railroad, though," he grumbled as he turned away. "'Tain't th' railroad's fault. Th' railroad ain't feedin' y'u. Here comes th' guy now what's responsible fer y'ur chuck. Why don't y'u fight it out wit' *him?*"

The young clerk's eyes were ringed with lines of sleeplessness and fatigue. In the middle of the night he had walked back from Hillcrest; the rest of the night he had spent in a vain search for his stolen commissary; and then, when dawn had come—having at heart his duty to the men—he had resolutely jumped in and helped the flunkeys find something for their breakfast. Nevertheless the fifty-six striking gandy dancers eyed him coldly and suspiciously when he approached. Fifty-six to one. Those were surely safe enough odds for bullying, even though the clerk was reported to have licked Garvey—when he was drunk.

"Hey, y'u w'ite-collar stiff! W'en are we gonna eat?"

The clerk turned about and looked at them—fifty-six husky, sneering tarriers, hostile in eye and attitude, cluttering the steps and doorways of their bunk-cars.

Crane's words struck him very significantly at the moment—

"These hard-boiled old chaws simply *do not love* a white-collar guy."

Bolton—his open young mind quick to sense the unreasonable hostility—decided to appeal to the fairness of their natures.

"Boys," he began frankly, "I'm going to see that you get a real good dinner. If you'll only give me a little more time to straighten out this unfortunate matter——"

A sudden outburst of hoots and cat-calls drowned the closing words of his explanation.

"Aw, more bull!" croaked an old shovel stiff with a beak like a poll-parrot's and a voice like a bullfrog's. "We ain't put our teet' troo nuttin' sence Big Bill Garvey went away!"

"Waddidju chase Big Bill fer—hey? Because he don't wear no w'ite collar?"

The gandys began edging cautiously in Bolton's direction, each measuring his advance to accord carefully with that of the others.

"Yah, yah! Th' only hasher we ever had. Y'u chased him offen th' job—hey?—because he took a coupla shots th' same as th' rest of us? W'y, y'u teetot'lin' stiff, w'ere d' y'u t'ink y'are—in Sunny school?"

A roar of mirth and mutual encouragement rose from the throats of all the gandys. The clerk—both indignation and surprize written on his features—stood his ground. He could scarcely realize that these men could be so utterly stupid as to fail to understand that he was trying to clean up the camp for their own good.

"Why, your own cronies—the very fellows you worked with—are probably the ones that robbed you of the grub! Don't you know that?" he exclaimed hotly, his surprize changing to disgust.

"——! I b'leeve he peddled th' com's'ry hisself—hey, fellers? That's allus th' way wit' these teetot'lin' geezers. Djever see one that wuzunt crooked?"

This from a gandy with a ruby-colored nose, who shook his fist at Bolton.

"We awta lynch y'u, y'u w'ite-collar stiff!"

The gandys, in a sudden wave of collective bravery, completely surrounded Bolton in order to rob him of the opportunity to look them all in the eyes at the same time. Across the clerk's pale face swept a sudden flare of anger. He pulled off his coat and threw it upon the ground.

"Now," he shouted scornfully, "if you'll come *one at a time*—like *white* men——"

His defiant gaze swept the encircling mob of strikers. With fists clenched and chest heaving with excitement, he stood ready for action against any odds.

"Dog-gone!" breathed the straw boss admiringly. "Ef that kid ain't guts clean frum his scalp-lock t' his toe-nails!" Raising his voice to a sudden shout, he continued—

"Ef one o' y'u beezoes lays a finger on that feller I'll clean out y'ur hull —— gang!"

The straw dived frantically into his car to get his revolver. When he reappeared a minute afterward, weapon in hand, he stopped on the car steps and stared in amazement. The tense expression on his face relaxed slowly into a wide grin. The entire crowd of gandys could be seen rushing pell-mell down the track toward the north where, about a mile distant, a single maroon-colored coach stood coupled to an engine. The soft purr of the locomotive's exhaust came distinctly along on the still morning air. The straw boss, cramming a huge chew of tobacco into his mouth, put away his revolver and rushed after the men.

The clerk was standing stock still where they had left him—his fists still clenched awaiting their onslaught and a sudden relief and wonder swimming in his eyes. Presently he put on his coat, shrugged his shoulders and walked resolutely away in the direction of the Pidgin Coop.

"And those are the fellows," he muttered to himself, "that I am trying to give a square deal to. I really wonder if it's worth while?"

Scarcely had Bolton arrived at the saloon when the little morning local—over an hour late—pulled into the Drayton flag station and discharged three passengers.

"Why, Bill, the camp is deserted!" exclaimed one of them. "I don't see a soul!"

"Look up there—at the Junction," was a big, broad-shouldered man's significant reply. "What do y'u see, Crane?"

"Why, it's the pay car, sure enough!" replied Crane with an understanding grin. "More money for the saloon-keeper!"

"I dunno," objected Garvey uncertainly. "What d' *y'u* think, Simsy?" continued the big man with a strange glint in his steel-gray eyes.

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-course——"

Crane laughed, looking quizzically at

Sims, whose face was badly scratched and swollen.

"We'd better go right over to the saloon, boys," said the runner in a graver tone. "Bolton isn't here. We may find him there."

AFTER the three food-thieves had left the Pidgin Coop bar on the preceding night, they stumbled back over the rocky trail to the camp of the gandy dancers, which they found in darkness. It was ten o'clock. The clerk had gone to Hillcrest, and the sky was overcast. The tired working-men had long since sought repose and no one was stirring about.

"Slade," said Gryce authoritatively, "y'u carry th' key t' th' tool box, hey? Git out a coupla pinch bars an' th' switch key an' th' derail key. Easy, now. We don't wanta advertise this li'l' bu'glary."

"Gimme a shot o' that booze," pleaded the crum boss.

"Me, too," chimed in Beehan.

Gryce snorted disdainfully.

"Gotta have more booze t' work up y'ur nerve, hey? Nice pair o' blokes!"

He produced a pint bottle, however, and all drank. The cook and the crum boss seemed reluctant to undertake the job in hand, but over their weaker natures the sneering philosophy of Gryce at last gained sway.

"If y'u don't git him, he'll git youse guys," was the pith of the gandy dancer's argument. "He's lookin' t' can y'u, Slade, first chanst he gits—y'u know it an' I know it. He's after y'ur scalp, too, Bee'an. No guy kin spoil all th' hash y'u do, an' git by wit' it. Th' gandys is howlin' fierce about y'ur chuck. He's prob'ly gone t' wire fer a noo cook, anyway. He ain't no dummy, even if he is a stiff. He's wise t' y'u drinkin' up all th' extrack, too."

Gryce passed the bottle around once more and the resultant bravado that welled up in the breasts of the two delinquents made further argument unnecessary. The thieves thereupon reconnoitered the commissary car. No lamplight shone through its tiny windows. On the door a small square of white was discernible. Gryce struck a match and peered closely at it.

"It's a note," he grunted. "Pinned on t' th' door. 'Back in th' mornin', Bolton,' it says. Git y'ur tools, Slade. It's a long time till mornin'."

Slade presently brought forth two pinch bars, the key to the switch and the key of the derail. The commissary car was the first of the string, lying nearest the switch. Beehan and Slade pried the wheels backward with their bars, releasing the strain on the coupling-pin, which enabled Gryce to uncouple the car. The bars were then reversed and the men began to pinch the car gradually away from the string in the direction of the switch that connected the spur with the main line. The car lying next to the commissary was the cook-car, and beyond that lay the dining-car. The sleeping-cars of the gandy dancers, the foreman and the assistant foreman were at the farther end of the string and there was little chance of any of the sleepers being awakened by the slight noise.

The spur ran slightly down grade to the main line; and the main line itself, for a distance of twenty miles south, ran down a two per cent. grade.

Gryce climbed the ladder to the roof of the car and stood by the brake wheel. The crum boss ran ahead, unlocked the derail and threw it off and then proceeded to the switch, which he also unlocked and turned in such manner as to permit the passage of the car to the main track.

The car moved slowly down grade, passed over the switch, gained the main line and at last arrived at a cross-road that ran through the woods to the Pidgin Coop. Gryce applied the brake, swearing profusely because the mechanism was rusty on account of non-usage and therefore hard to manipulate.

"T'row y'ur bar under th' wheel, Slade!" he shouted anxiously.

The crum boss obeyed orders and the car jolted and came to a stop. Gryce descended quickly.

"Now youse guys, we gotta work fast," he commanded. "Le's have that bar, Slade. Th' car'll stand. We gotta break th' lock on th' door. —— what's this?" he exclaimed a moment later. "Why, th' poor simp fergot t' lock th' door! Kin y'u beat it? Why, this ain't bu'glary 't all. Jist helpin' y'urself."

Gryce walked into the car, followed by the cook and crum boss. He struck a match and looked around. Bolton's bunk bore evidences of having been slept in, but was empty. On the desk stood a lamp that Gryce lighted, turning the wick down low. The commissary supplies were ranged about the floor and on the shelves in an orderly manner and the thieves' eyes were bright with anticipation as they surveyed the extent of the loot.

"They ain't no train nort' afore mornin'," mused Gryce reflectively, "an' we're on th' nort'bound track. But we got a tough job pinchin' th' car back up grade—so le's go to it fast."

The men worked quietly save for an occasional curse as they tussled with a heavy box or bag. Within half an hour the most valuable of the supplies had been transferred to the ground. The stolen articles included provisions, clothing, shoes and tobacco.

"Ain't there anythin' more in that bottle?" whined Beehan at length.

"Y'u'll git a drink—when bizness is over," growled Gryce. "Here's Pidgin comin' now."

A moment afterward the saloon-keeper arrived with a team and wagon. He took a lantern from beneath the seat and clambered to the ground.

"Put th' stuff in quick," he directed anxiously. "We kin talk bizness up at th' Coop, fellers. Y'ur a-goin' t' run th' car back, hain't y'u? Y'u can't leave it on th' main line—thar'd be —— t' pay!"

"Sure we'll run it back," said Gryce reassuringly, "soon's we settle up. There ain't no train doo, anyway."

The four men hastily loaded the goods in Pidgin's wagon and the saloon-keeper whipped up his horses. Soon the greater part of Bolton's commissary, in alien hands, with the three thirsty thieves tagging along behind the wagon, had disappeared in the darkness.

STUTTERING SIMS crawled from beneath Bolton's bunk and gratefully stretched his cramped legs. The stutterer was badly frightened. First he looked cautiously out of the door in the direction the looters had gone; then he turned an apprehensive gaze upon the well-nigh empty car. It was a desolate-looking commissary that met his view. Instead of the neat and plentiful array of articles that the clerk had confided to his care, there remained nothing now but a few bags of turnips and potatoes and some miscellaneous articles of little value.

Sims had long since abandoned the habit of cursing which, in his case, consumed too much time and energy. Unconsciously he had become somewhat of a philosopher. Now, therefore, instead of indulging in recriminations, he strove to conquer his fears and to think. His first move was to leave the car and secrete himself in the roadside shadows pending further developments.

An hour passed. An indistinct murmuring of voices then reached his ears through the nocturnal stillness. The thieves were evidently returning. Presently Sims could hear their footsteps scruffing along the rocky road. So close did they pass to the hidden watcher that he could see, even in the darkness, that two of the men were staggering. Gryce's sneering tones snapped out:

"Th' tight-wad! Only two hunnerd iron men fer a t'ousand wort' o' swag! An' a quart o' his blasted scat t'rown in! Well, le's go in an' have a drink—then we'll split th' dough."

Sims crept stealthily out of the shadows and peered through the open car doorway. The lamp was still burning as Gryce had originally left it; and by its glow Sims saw the gandy dancer put a roll of bills upon the table and pull the cork from a quart bottle of liquor. Both cook and crum boss appeared to be half-drunk. Beehan clutched the newly opened bottle, swung it avidly to his lips and swilled a gill of it at a pull.

The absconding cook's face was the color of a beet and his eyes blinked owlishly. Still clasping the liquor bottle and pressing it almost to his bosom as though fearful of its escape, he squatted unsteadily down upon Bolton's bunk with a long sigh that seemed to terminate his immediate activity. The crum boss glared angrily at him. Suddenly, with a snarl, Slade reached over and yanked the bottle from the cook's hands.

"Wanta go t' sleep wit' it, Bee'n?" he demanded with appropriate sarcasm. "They's other guys drinkin' too, ain't they?"

The crum boss accordingly allowed a gill or two of the strong whisky to gurgle down his own throat; the almost immediate result of which was that he, who had not a whit more backbone than the cook, was likewise speedily reduced to a state of imbecility.

Gryce did not drink. There was that in his eyes that could easily be read by a sober mind. Comprehension of his dastardly scheme came to the stutterer in a sudden flash. The unscrupulous gandy dancer was making his accomplices drunk with the end in view of appropriating the entire proceeds of the crime to himself. He would steal their share of the money and decamp, leaving them drunk and helpless against discovery in the very car that they had looted. And the car was standing at the moment exposed to traffic on the main line!

Having progressed thus far in its reasoning, Sims' brain grasped its duty and its opportunity at the same instant. His fingers slid into his overalls pocket and drew forth the key that Bolton had entrusted to his unworthy care. Then, suddenly springing forward, the stutterer slammed the door shut and locked it. Almost instantly came a hail of insane cursings from within, accompanied by heavy poundings on the locked door. Sims, having atoned in slight measure for his delinquent guardianship, gave vent to his feelings by a half-hysterical laugh of happiness and relief. The three thieves were locked in the car they had robbed and the key was in his pocket. The windows were only a foot square—too tiny to permit escape. The lock, the car door and the framework were stout.

The stutterer had already started toward camp with the intention of arousing the gang when the crash of glass made him hesitate. Then he heard a scraping sound at one of the windows. Rushing back to the car he observed Gryce, whose features were readily discernible by the lamplight within, whittling industriously away at one of the window frames with a clasp knife; thinking no doubt to enlarge the aperture sufficiently to permit of escape.

"I'll give y'u fifty t' git outa here!" he yelled hoarsely when he saw the stutterer's shadow.

Sims made no reply. He paced back and forth beside the car—on guard.

"A hunnerd!" shouted Gryce in a frenzy.

The stutterer could not have given his thoughts speech, even if he would. The excitement of events had taken his slight vocal faculty completely from him.

"Hunnerd an' fifty!" howled the imprisoned man, made desperate at length by his captor's indifference.

"Two hunnerd—all I got!" he shrieked at last, pledging the three rogues' entire capital to liquidate his importunities.

"Blast y'u, y'u stutt'rin' ——!" yelled the furious gandy dancer, in tardy identification of his silent captor.

He proceeded to threaten Sims with all manner of physical torture, of which the most mild and least offensive form was "cutting his heart out." Finally, when neither his bribes nor his threats had sufficed to elicit even one stuttered syllable from the silent man on guard, Gryce fell to work again with his knife in an effort to enlarge the window opening. Sims picked up a piece of ballast from the road bed and cast it neatly through the aperture, striking Gryce upon the mouth.

"B-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-belly-robber!" he exploded scornfully at last—the most opprobrious epithet at his command.

Vile oaths in recognition of Sims's true aim, popped out of Gryce's mouth like a string of firecrackers. The trapped man, to render his face less conspicuous, thereupon extinguished the light. An irregular cadence that jarred upon his ear, like the strings of a viol discordantly jangled, told the watcher that Gryce's partners in crime had guzzled their way into oblivion. They were utterly drunk and consequently perfectly safe.

The indefatigable rascality of Gryce, however, held the stutterer to his guard. Sims was reluctant to go to camp in search of assistance for fear the master crook of the little band by some means should escape. The shame of his dereliction had stiffened into a determination that there should be no second lapse of duty on his part. He resolved to remain beside the jail car until Bolton returned, or until someone else in authority accidentally discovered him.

About three o'clock in the morning a strong uneasiness took hold of Sims. While the first passenger train on the northbound track would be Number Three—due in Drayton about six o'clock—nevertheless there was always a chance that a drag of coal empties would come lumbering up the valley and surprize him. Sims determined to be prepared for this contingency. He went into the neighboring woods to gather brush and twigs for a signal-fire in case he should hear the rumble of an approaching freight.

Scarcely had he begun to collect these materials, however, when a series of loud crashes against the car door brought him back to his post on the run. Gryce had finally become desperate. His unsubmissive nature was charged with fury over the thought of arrest—especially when effected through such contemptible instrumentality as that of "Stutt'rin' Sims." The caged gandy dancer, therefore, had brought Bolton's desk to bear on the door as a battering ram with which to smash himself out of custody. The car trembled and rocked back and forth on its springs from the force of the blows. Suddenly it began to move down grade.

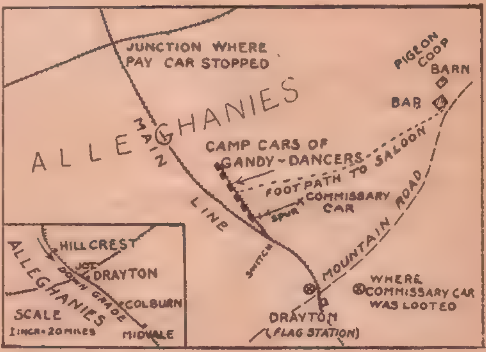
Sims sprang nimbly up the ladder and strained against the brake wheel, but the brake seemingly could not be applied. The mechanism had not been used for months, or years, perhaps. It was rusty and ineffective. The stutterer uselessly spent his strength in an attempt to coerce the refractory device; and, while he strove, the car gained speed. Great shadowy bulks of mountains seemed suddenly to be rushing up at him out of the darkness and the stutterer's timid soul quaked with terror. He realized that descent from the car without injury had become out of the question. Therefore abandoning his futile efforts to tighten the brake, he flattened himself cautiously full length along the roof of the car, grasping the brake-post with both hands to steady himself.

He quailed with apprehension of a splintering crash that might come at any moment in case the runaway left the rails or collided head-on with an approaching train. A frantic screaming that rose shrilly above the dull roar of the flying box-car told him that the prisoner Gryce was likewise aware of the grave peril. It was just as well for the other two—submerged in merciful drunkenness—that they did not know.

Mile after mile the commissary car plunged downward through the foot-hills of the Alleghanies, thumping violently on its straining springs, careening around curves and filling the still air with the menacing thunder of its flight. Past a little hillside station it sped. Sims could see the operator start up from his instrument and peer sharply through the window into the darkness as they flashed by.

"Colburn," thought the stutterer. "Ten miles from Drayton. Next station, Midvale—eight miles farther—end of the grade."

He feared the Colburn operator would wire Midvale to switch them off, because they were running south on the northbound track. This operator naturally would have no means of knowing that the runaway car carried human freight. Gryce's yells for some reason had subsided, and the gandy dancer had extinguished the light before the car had left Drayton. Sims himself was utterly incapable of a shout—moving a mountain would have been an equally easy task for him at the time.



Just north of Midvale the grade suddenly spent itself, and the speed of the car diminished; but even as Sims was drawing a breath of thankfulness over the thought that all danger was past, he espied the Midvale operator rushing, lantern in hand, over to the switch. Sims—unable to shout—pulled himself upright, clutching the brake wheel.

He was seen at last—but a second too late. The commissary car took the switch at forty miles an hour, reeled, left the rails, plowed into the road bed—an interminable procession of long-tailed comets seemed to flash before the stutterer's eyes.

"It's Sims."

"Who's 'Sims', Bill?"

"Stutt'rin' Sims—a gandy out at th' camp. Th' operator says he couldn't find nuthin' busted about him—landed in a pile o' cinders. Face needs a coupla yards o' court-plaster—that's all."

The stutterer opened his eyes and stared wonderingly at the big man bending over him. He seemed to be lying in a railroad depot where trainmen and passengers were crowding curiously about. Presently, spurred by returning consciousness, he staggered dazedly to his feet.

"He's all right, Bill. Bring him in the smoker with us. He can spit out the story on his way back to Drayton."

"He'll need all that time—an' then some," grunted the big man, picking Sims up bodily and carrying him trainward.

JIM PIDGIN'S sour visage wore unmistakable signs of Demon Drink. The tight-fisted proprietor of the Pidgin Coop always loosened his purse strings a little and caroused more than usual when his old friends the woodchoppers came out of the woods. Whenever he drank he became reckless and impulsive, and these same qualities—recklessness and impulsiveness—had trapped him the night previous into a purchase of stolen goods. He was at last beginning the descent to sobriety after an all-night session with the woodchoppers. In fact some of these latter were still at the bar—nearly a dozen of them—burly, loud-voiced roughnecks indulging in woods badinage and argument and steadily drinking themselves into deeper drunkenness.

The saloon-keeper, while serving a stranger with a glass of beer, felt a sudden twinge of uneasiness. The man wore a collar and necktie. This fact in itself was not exactly remarkable; but, taken in conjunction with certain other peculiarities of the young man's person, it afforded a clue to his identity. Pidgin of late had been accustomed to hear much of a certain "w'ite-collar stiff," who had also been repeatedly referred to by some customers as a "teetot'lin' kid" and a "rummy-hater." Moreover he, Pidgin, had been assured that this kid, when overtaken by a certain calamity that threatened him, would "beat it," or "fly the coop" or indulge in some similar form of ignominious self-effacement.

Pidgin, looking over his dirty bar into the "kid's" unswerving gray eyes, began therefore to entertain some doubts as to his wisdom in having pulled off a nocturnal deal with a couple of bar-room bums and a drunken camp cook. True, this was a wild part of the State and "raw" things were being continually pulled off and gotten away with; but—there were the "Black Hussars." A sudden recollection of the intrepidity of Pennsylvania's mounted police added considerably to Pidgin's uneasiness. Those men were known to be daring devils. It was popular knowledge that they were at all times ready to ride rough-shod—even one or two of them—into resistance of any kind, armed or unarmed, without heed to numbers or any other phase of an opposing danger. Furthermore, they usually got what they went after.

While meditating upon these things the saloon-keeper's unsteady fingers poured him out a great drink of liquor, which he gulped at a draught.

"Hey, Jim!" bawled one of the woodchoppers reprovingly. "Drinkin' alone, be y'u? Whar d' *we* come in?"

Pidgin, being a miser, was naturally possessed of a limited degree of craftiness. His perturbed gaze swung from the stranger at the bar and alighted on the burly forms of the carousing woodchoppers. Their strong arms and knotty fists would, he reasoned, be invaluable in a sudden emergency such as a case of "rough house." Brotherliness, therefore, had little part in the feeling that prompted him to refill their whiskey glasses. The choppers thereupon roared out a drunken toast and pledged their uncouth friendship. Pidgin's glass was also taking effect. He felt brave—defiant—right down to his toe-nails. The dozen husky brawlers from the woods aligned themselves in his alcoholized brain as a strong defensive cohort. Moreover, had he not in his possession the cook's receipt for the money? That would let him out.

Pidgin's forebodings miraculously left him and faded into the reeking saloon air. He leaned familiarly over the bar toward the stranger who, while glancing curiously about the bar-room, was still sipping his beer.

"Y'u frum th' camp over thar?" he mildly inquired.

"I'm the clerk," was the customer's terse reply.

The saloon-keeper ruminated, searching the gray eyes and attempting to grasp what lay behind them. They were baffling gray eyes, though; and whatever lay behind them, so far as Pidgin was concerned, was out of sight. The clerk spoke again. His voice was smooth, his words well-articulated and bearing no hint of anxiety or excitement.

"I'm looking for a man named Gryce and a man named Slade and also our camp cook—Beehan. I understand they were over here last night, doing a little business with you."

This was very disconcerting news to the saloon-keeper, and he naturally wondered just how much more the clerk knew. His intelligence informed him at once that a complete denial was out of the question; his limited craftiness prompted him to admit the deal, with reservations.

"Wal, yore cook feller was here. I took

a li'l' stock frum him—paid him fur it," he acknowledged cautiously.

Pidgin's readiness to admit so much proved his undoing. Bolton's eyes were boring mercilessly into his, impelling him to protect himself—by falling still deeper into the trap.

"Got his signatoor," continued the flustered saloon-keeper, fumbling about in his cash drawer for the document, which he presently flourished a moment defiantly in front of the clerk's eyes before returning it to the drawer. Almost instantly he realized his mistake; but the harm had been done. Bolton was far from being in the class of the illiterates who must stare at and ponder over a document to absorb its details. The clerk's eyesight was excellent and the processes of his brain ran like quicksilver. He deciphered the whole of the clumsy scripture at a glance.

"Two hundred dollars!" he exclaimed sharply. "So that's what those three cheap crooks got for looting my commissary car and peddling over a thousand dollars' worth of company supplies? And you went down to the track at midnight and received the stolen goods!"

Bolton gazed in disgust at the man who had connived at the robbery of food from the very mouths of his gang. Pidgin, feeling his props kicked from beneath his feet and wondering how the details of the dirty deal had become known, kept groping about in his clumsy consciousness for some manner of evasion until, finding none, he fell back upon the last resort of trapped men of his type. He began to bluster.

"Yore cook had th' 'thor'ty t' sell, didn't he?" he exploded harshly.

"He had not," replied Bolton sternly, "and you knew it."

The violence of the argument drew the maudlin woodchoppers away from their drink.

"W'at's th' Lizzie tryin' t' put over on y'u, Jim?" bawled one of them belligerently. "W'at y'u say—put 'im out?"

This strong arm offer encouraged Pidgin.

"Who are y'u, anyway, but a measly pencil pusher?" he howled sneeringly. "I don't know y'u, w'ether y'u're givin' me gas, or not. I been a-doin' bizness wit' yore cooks all 'long. Th' big feller peddled me some stuff, too."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed the clerk indignantly. "Garvey was square!"

"Aw, c'm outside an' tell it t' th' world, Jack!" bawled a woodsman roughly.

Two huge grimy paws fastened themselves about Bolton's shoulders and began dragging him toward the door. He twisted furiously out of the bear-like clasp and struck hard. There was a clatter of broken glass as the bully fell suddenly against the bar, upsetting a decanter of whisky and spilling several glasses of the same. The saloon-keeper began cursing frightfully. The clerk found himself surrounded by the half-drunken woodchoppers, all striving at once to get a clout at him; but he, sober and possessed of a deadly coolness, was fighting his way successfully to the exit when the burly ruffian who had at first molested him caught him unexpectedly from behind and yanked him backward upon the floor.

"W'at y'u say, Jim—put th' boots t' 'im?"

The poor clerk was in a terrible predicament. The brutal chopper was standing over him—his right foot, shod with a heavy lumberman's calked boot, held poised above the face of the intended victim. Pidgin leered immediate encouragement in the atrocious design. One second more and the cruel calks would have been driven into Bolton's defenseless face, marring his features for life; but before the brute could perform the intended mayhem a huge figure had stridden through the open doorway and shot forward a long upthrust straight from the hip. Down crashed the bully upon the floor, as if he had suddenly been hit by a pile-driver.

"Bill Garvey!" was Bolton's astonished exclamation.

He regained his feet with athletic swiftness.

"It's y'u an' me, clerk," grunted the old cook. "Crane an' Sims ain't strong on th' rough stuff. *Watch* y'urself!"

Garvey shot out his sledge-hammer right and felled a big chopper, who had aimed a blow at the clerk. The cook and the clerk gradually fought their way through the avenging woodsmen and gained the doorway, through which peered the frightened eyes of Sims.

"Go an' tell th' gandys!" roared Garvey to the stutterer. "Y'u can't do no good here!"

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-course——"

Sims' fleet feet were already skimming skilfully over the rocky pathway.

"HEY, guys—we gotta chase that stiff outa th' camp."

"Sure—he made Big Bill haul his freight—bes' hasher we ever had. Le's make him foller Big Bill!"

"We don't want no teetot'lin' stiff runnin' a gandy camp. It don't go. A gandy's a nat'ral born camel—gotta have a drink ev'ry so offen."

"How 'bout eats? Ain't we ever goin' t' put our teet' troo nuttin' ag'in?"

"Me belly t'inks me t'roat's cut."

Sixty gandy dancers with Power in their pockets hiked swiftly along the trail leading to the Pidgin Coop. They were eager to feel the flow of red liquor through their veins. Under its stimulus they would find no difficulty in lifting their spirits to the necessary pitch of enthusiasm to rid the outfit of the white-collared tyrant whom they alleged to be the cause of their misfortunes.

"W'at th' ——'s this a-comin'?"

The foremost gandy dancers stopped in amazement at sight of a bareheaded apparition skimming swiftly toward them along the trail. The man's face was badly scratched; he was pop-eyed and almost breathless.

"Stutt'rin' Sims! W'at's th' matter, Simsy?"

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-c-course——"

"Aw, wissel it!"

"Don't y'u know th' deef-an'-dumb alfybet?"

With a despairing gurgle the stutterer at last abandoned the idea of communicating his message by word of mouth. He pointed with a wild-eyed significance toward the saloon and began immediately running back thither, beckoning the gandys to follow. These queer antics caused a quick general stampede in the direction of the Pidgin Coop. Fast through the woods at the heels of the fleet-footed stutterer rushed the wondering gandys, bursting at last upon the scene of the battle that was raging outside the saloon door. They saw Crane, the company's runner, Bolton, the clerk, and their old kitchen deity, Bill Garvey, fighting for their lives against the vicious assaults of a dozen half-drunken, shouting, cursing woodchoppers. Jim Pidgin stood in the saloon doorway, an evil sneer on his face. He seemed to be holding something in his hand. Suddenly a glittering object hurtled through the air and the clerk fell to the ground.

"By ——! Pidgin, y'u murd'rin' hound, I saw y'u sling that bottle!" panted Garvey. "Into th' joint, fellers, an' clean it out! That —— gin-slingin', short-changin' crook stole y'ur eats, an' now looks as if he's killed y'ur clerk! If youse gandys don't git revenge, y'ur a bunch o' scabs—d' y'u hear?"

Garvey's voice gained strength and rose to a roar as he sucked wind into his heaving lungs. The frightened woodchoppers, outnumbered five to one, stumbled back into the bar-room. Pidgin, his face suddenly gone white, took shelter behind his bar. Crane bent over the injured man, shouting to one of the gandys to fetch water from the pump.

"Now!" roared the fighting cook. "Foller me!"

A score of husky gandy dancers with Garvey at their head burst into the bar-room.

"Rough house!" cried Pidgin desperately.

His henchmen, well-nigh winded and yelling frantically for more liquor, were in no condition to answer his appeal. Big Bill swept aside the out-thrust arms of a couple of choppers, leaned over the bar, caught Pidgin under the arm-pits and yanked him brutally back over his bulwark. He struck the saloon-keeper once and then threw him contemptuously into a corner where he lay, his nose spouting blood.

"Naw—I didn't git them flippers slingin' hash, Pidgin!" he bellowed mirthfully. "Now, youse gandys! Make a clean-up—d' y'u hear?"

Responsive to their old cook's furious exhortations, the gandys launched the full force of their sobriety, fed by the rage resulting from their grievances, at the fallen saloon-keeper's wavering cohort. They surrounded the woodsmen; hemmed them in; jabbed them; cut and pummeled them. A gandy is one of the toughest and most muscular of the whole migratory branch of civilized man. When he wants to, he can fight.

"Give 'em their own medicine!" bawled Garvey unmercifully. "They was twelve t' three ag'in us, an' still that blasted skunk in th' corner had t' heave a bottle!"

The little bar-room rocked with the tread of stumbling feet. Oaths and frightful revilings rose on all sides. Glasses were snatched from the bar and sent whizzing through the air. Window panes began crashing. The long bar mirror—Pidgin's pride—slithered into fragments. Pidgin got dizzily upon his feet and stood watching with wild eyes the destruction of his den. Garvey made a circular swipe at his bleeding face, over the heads of two or three fighters, with the flat of his palm. Pidgin fell again, with a groan.

Some of the choppers had fallen, battered and spent. They were being trampled.

"Make a clean-up—d' y'u hear?"

Big Bill's deep voice came in rumbling gasps out of his heaving chest. His rugged face was cut, bruised and bleeding. His steel-gray eyes glowed red. Bull-like, he fought on.

An enterprising gandy, scouting behind the bar in quest of refreshment, overturned a demijohn of brandy. Whether by accident, or prompted by a pure love of deviltry, some one threw a lighted match into the liquor, was not known. However a sheet of flame leaped up suddenly behind the bar and excited cries of "Fire! Fire!" mingled with a loud clattering of horses' hooves without.

"Th' Black Hussars!" cried a frightened voice.

Two stalwart, black-uniformed mounted policemen with icy determination in their eyes and revolvers in their hands forced their way into the burning saloon.

"Give way!" they commanded sharply. "Give way for the police!"

JIM PIDGIN'S sour face wore unmistakable signs of combat. His broken nose was badly swollen and discolored. His cracked lips were still bleeding. The fire of an impotent wrath burned in his bloodshot eyes while he stood gazing at the heap of ashes and smoking débris that, but an hour previous, had been the Pidgin Coop. The unscrupulous saloonkeeper—not content with legitimate business—had coveted his patrons' very subsistence. His covetousness had reacted to his utter ruin.

"Do you want to make any complaint?"

Pidgin turned to the constable standing beside him, but before he could reply to the question Crane said quietly:

"If he makes a complaint, I demand his arrest on two charges—receiving stolen goods and assault with intent to kill. I have a number of witnesses."

Pidgin bit his bleeding lips and stifled an oath. Crane turned on his heel and walked over to the barn, where the stolen supplies had been located—in a secret cache under the hay—by Stuttering Sims. Several gandys were engaged in the work of getting the goods together for transport back to the camp.

"Say, young fellow," said the runner jovially, "Garvey tells me you're a hasher. I can give you a job of crum boss in this camp—or I can get you a job cooking in another camp. Which do you want?"

"Of c-c-c-c-c-c-course," protested the stutterer, "the c-c-c-c-c——"

"Cook or crum boss?" persisted the runner, winking at the grinning gandys.

"—c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c-c——"

"Oh, we'll make it cook," decided Crane with a laugh. "You won't peddle our stock, anyway."

Sims sighed. He was forever falling into responsibility.

"HAW, haw, haw! Is that th' best youse gandys kin do on pay-day?" Garvey gave vent to a deep rumble of merriment. Around the pump that stood in the yard of the defunct Pidgin Coop a motley crowd of men was gathered, washing blood from their faces and hands and endeavoring to erase from their persons the signs of recent conflict. Frequently one of the gandys would lift a great dipper of the cool water to his parched lips and guzzle its refreshing contents with evident satisfaction.

"Whoever heard of a gandy drinkin' water on pay-day?" went on the old cook derisively. "Two weeks ago y'u was throwin' y'ur pay wads acrost this pirate's bar an' raisin' —— because he wouldn't grab 'em quick enough t' suit y'u! Times change, hey? Now y'u're all teetot'lers!"

"How 'bout y'urself, Bill? Wasn't y'u doin' it too—hey?" growled one of the gandy dancers.

"Sure—I was jist as big a sucker as youse guys," admitted Garvey with a grin.

"How did y'u happen t' git converted, Bill?" asked a gandy curiously.

"By force," replied the old cook soberly. "I got a right jab t' th' jaw that started me wisdom teeth a-workin'. Fust off, I was sore—but I got over it. That punch knocked more sense into me ol' dome than it's had fur th' last fifty years. Now, I figger that a feller that han's me a wallop like that is a fre'n' of mine; so I git even wit' him by helpin' 'im out. His idee was t' clean up th' outfit—make it fit fur workin' men, an' not bums. Gryce was th' biggest crook in th' camp—but he's dead—skull smashed in. Bee'n an' Slade is in th' hospital wit' busted legs an' collar-bones. They won't peddle no com's'ries fur some time. An' now, this Pidgin dump is outa bus'ness fur good. It's sure been a reg'ler clean-up, hey? An' we'll keep it clean!"

There was a savage earnestness about the old cook's words that made his hearers think. Restlessly they fingered the unspent pay-rolls in their overalls pockets. It would be a decidedly unusual feeling for them to awaken next morning, sober and fit for work, with their money still intact. Moreover, as a recompense for the loss of their pay-day carouse, they had a delightful mental vista of long successions of tasty puddings and tender brown flapjacks concocted by their old cook's master hand. How different from the sodden culinary achievements of the bungler and extract-guzzler, Beehan!

"Furthersomore," went on Garvey solemnly, "le's have no more gassin 'bout 'w'ite-collar stiffs' in this camp. I've come t' b'lieve that a w'ite-collar stiff's got it all over a roughneck fur real sense. W'en I was in N' Yawk I didn't go on a drunk—fust time on record. I blew in me dough fur a real front—collar 'n' hames an' all. An' th' fust time I hear any bunk about a w'ite-collar stiff, I'm a-goin' t' harness up—see? Then y'u'll have two w'ite-collar stiffs t' pick on, 'stead o' one. An' that *one*—" here the old cook's voice adopted a tone of almost fierce loyalty "—has got *full* charge o' this here camp. He's th' squarest pencil pusher I ever worked wit'—th' only one I knowed that's got any guts!"

The crowd of gandy dancers indulged in an uneasy shuffling of feet and began looking guiltily at one another.

"Sure, th' young lad is all right, Bill," admitted one of them sheepishly.

"He's a-doin' th' bes' he kin," asserted another promptly.

"He's a-doin' fine! Bes' clerk we ever had!" exclaimed a third enthusiastically.

"Hooray fur th' clerk an' th' cook!" yelled a jubilant fourth.

"H-o-o-r-a-y!" came a thunderous acclamation from the throats of half a hundred gandy dancers.

The sudden roar carried consternation into the hearts of a forlorn little group of woodchoppers who stood near by. Then it echoed its way gradually out of the valley and lost itself in the hills.

A pale-faced young man sitting beside the pump and holding a wet handkerchief to his cut and aching head tried vainly to hide a smile.

The CAMP-FIRE

A FREE-TO-ALL MEETING PLACE FOR READERS WRITERS AND ADVENTURERS

Our Camp-Fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. Some whose voices we used to know have taken the Long Trail and are heard no more, but they are still memories among us, and new voices are heard, and welcomed.

We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance. The *spirit* of adventure lives in all men; the rest is chance.

But something besides a common interest holds us together. Somehow a real comradeship has grown up among us. Men can not thus meet and talk together without growing into friendlier relations; many a time does one of us come to the rest for facts and guidance; many a close personal friendship has our Camp-Fire built up between two men who had never met; often has it proved an open sesame between strangers in a far land.

Perhaps our Camp-Fire is even a little more. Perhaps it is a bit of leaven working gently among those of different station toward the fuller and more human understanding and sympathy that will some day bring to man the real democracy and brotherhood he seeks. Few indeed are the agencies that bring together on a friendly footing so many and such great extremes as here. And we are numbered by the hundred thousand now.

If you are come to our Camp-Fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There is no obligation except ordinary manliness, no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.

A FEW words from F. R. Bechdolt in connection with his article in this issue:

San Francisco.

Jno. W. Poe and Chas. Siringo gave me the data. Poe gave most of it. In the Kid's death, you'll note I spoke of the Mexican warning him. This is Poe's idea and was Garret's—so Poe tells me. Poe is the only survivor of the posse. He is president of a bank in Roswell, N. M. In the Kid's escape I have Bell reading to the Kid—or rather looking for an item to read to him. He was reading the paper; that was told by the Kid to associates who told Siringo afterward. Jim East, who helped capture him, maintained the Kid must have lured Bell to a position where the Kid could steal his gun. I took the Kid's account and East's theory and pieced them together.

THE Kid went to Sumner because he was smitten with a relative of Pete Maxwell's. How much the girl cared for him is problematical. He had a way with women—so say East and others who knew him well. But Jno. W. Poe says that after the shooting the girl showed no particular emotion. So there you are.

In the details of the Kid's death I stick to Jno. W. Poe's narrative. He was there and saw it. Moreover, he is a particularly reliable man when it comes to giving data. I want to thank Jno. W. Poe, James H. East, Charles Siringo and others; and to recommend to any readers Siringo's "Lone Star Cowboy" in which he recites portions of this same tale together with other experiences. It is a book of facts.—F. R. BECHDOLT.

A LIFE in tabloid form. I'll say that's condensing quite a bit of adventure into quite a small space. Also, a good worker for our Camp-Fire Stations.

San Bernardino, Calif.

As for myself, born in Dayton, Ohio, Jan. 22, 1866; three trips around God's foot-stool; left home at 14 years of age; worked at most everything; saw some service this side of the water and in Africa; was aboard British tramp *Remembrance* in '98—blockade-runner, coal, wine and grub for Spanish fleet, Santiago de Cuba; chased into Martinique by *U. S. S. Dixie;* British tramp *Burton*, same service, lost at sea all hands early part of '99 out of Galveston to Bremerhaven; knew several boys aboard her—good fellows. Now traveling out of Los Angeles selling Oriental goods, and on my traveling will try and get all the Stations opened I can.—JOS. L. KELSO.

MOST of us aren't very wise in the history of ancient Asia—or the Asia of a few centuries ago or even the Asia of today, so when Harold Lamb does the work of digging it out and handing it to us on a platter it tastes pretty good:

Berkeley, California.

Our school histories, in fact all of our histories put together, do not give us much of an idea of Central Asia in the year 1771. It was that year and place, however, that saw the passing of the Giants.

OWING to this blank space in history—unwritten because no well-known battle took place therein, or any court cabal, or secret confessions of any lady in waiting—the writer will try to sketch the scene a little. The great empire of Genghis Khan had been broken up five hundred years ago. The wave of nomads, the Mongols from the steppe country of Central Asia, had settled back.

So the name of the mighty conqueror, Genghis Khan, was only a legend in the land; the grim figure of the lame Timur (called Tamerlane in European histories) had held its sway among the mountains of Central Asia and rested now in the tomb.

Other nomads, the Chagatai Mongols—called by us the Moguls—had arisen in the mountains north of Afghanistan, had ruled India, with splendor and wisdom; but their descendants of the peacock throne were only effigies who watched the incoming of the Portuguese, French and English. Warren Hastings is mentioned in our histories.

But India itself is separated from Central Asia by the Himalayas, and only Tibet had a hand in the passing of the Giants. Tibet—as we call it; the inhabitants term it Pö, and the castle-temple at Lhassa the Pö-tala—was the religious center of Central Asia, a kind of transmountain pope ruling over a hierarchy of priests, with spies, disciples and a fine system of news collection by mounted couriers. The authority of the Dalai Lama or King-Priest extended from the Chinese side of the Gobi desert (Pekin) to the outposts of the Russian armies on the Volga, and from Lhassa to the Arctic Circle.

IN OTHER words, the Dalai Lama had made himself spiritual master of a space about as large as the United States of America. This space—steppe land in the center, deserts and mountains on three sides, the frozen tundras of Siberia (then called Russian Tatary) to the North—was still held by the nomad tribes, the Tatars. They were not, however, the united Horde of Genghis Khan, but groups of separate tribes, herdsmen, with vague traditions of former battles.

Some were under Russian rule, others—in the Gobi region—were existing under the firm but benevolent hand of Ch'ien-lung who was emperor of China at the time of China's greatest power. Some more of the Tatar clans were imbued with Mohammedanism, or were allies of the Dalai Lama. But they were—and are to this day—independent chaps. The Torguts especially—the clan called the Giants.

THE Torguts, about 1620, during the brief empire of Galdan Khan in the mountains of Central Asia (the empire touched upon in the story "The Wolf Chaser,") refused servitude and migrated west as far as the Russian border, on the Volga. There they built villages and remained, contented enough with fighting and cattle raising.

Meanwhile the various Muscovite states were absorbed into an expanding empire under the vigorous hand of Peter the Great and, after him, Catherine. The Torguts were threatened with taxation, and with seizure of their sons by the Russians. To escape servitude, a second time, they chose to migrate to their homeland at the headwaters of the River Ili, then unoccupied. Ch'ien-lung had extended them an invitation to do so.

And they did it. At the time no one thought it possible; the distance was three thousand miles; it was then the dead of Winter on the snow-bound steppe. They had the disadvantage of covering the coldest region of their journey in a temperature around zero and crossing the two deserts and the Alai Bagh in mid-Summer. They also had their herds with all their possessions to transport.

ESTIMATES as to the numbers of the Torguts vary somewhat. Pallas calculates that 150,000 Torguts set out from the Volga; the annals of Ch'ien-lung mention 40,000 to 50,000 tents (more than 200,000 persons). But it is known that only 70,000 survived to reach the Ili. In other words, seven out of about seventeen souls lived through the journey.

You see, they had to fight their way; the tribes along their route, and especially to the south, were hostile, the Moslems vindictive, the Cossacks gave them two stiff battles, and their own lamas were deceitful—anxious to betray them if anything was to be gained by it.

This journey of the Giants has been called "a colossal trek." So it was—the last of the great men-movements of the world.

AS TO the rate of progress made by the Tatars, I have set it down as it happened. Thirty to fifty miles a day at times under the conditions sounds like a tall order. Yet it was done. Also the 150 miles of the Hunger Steppe, or desert, was traversed in three days. This was necessary because the "yellow" water was found to be undrinkable.

How they managed for fodder for the herds on the snow steppe I do not know. Of course the beasts died off rapidly and it is rather a miracle that a portion of the herds endured for the first half of the journey. As for the camels, they got along well enough and the ponies, it seems, dug into the snow at times for grass underneath.

ON THEIR journey they carried off a European, who appears in the story. This man was eventually released and sent back with a quota of followers, reaching the Russian border safe, after earning the confidence of the Tatars. The character of Zebek Dortshi, chief of the Red Camel clan, is puzzling, first because I have not seen otherwhere any record of a Tatar noble who betrayed his clan and the name itself has not a Tatar sound. So I have set him down as being one of the *ilkhan* chiefs, a man with Persian blood in him.

The cult of the *bonpas* among the Tibetan monks has a curious story. Magic originally had no part in the Buddhist ritual of the *tsong-kapa*. But the disciples of Buddhism who were establishing themselves in Tibet about 1100 A.D. found the native devil-worship too strong to wipe out. So the home-bred conjurers, the *mik-thru tse khen*, were enrolled in the priesthood of the Buddhists. Eventually the devil-worshipers became the prime movers among the mountain monks. So the originally humane doctrines of the Sakyas became a most degenerate thing. To-day in Lhassa there is a quarter of the town devoted to the magicians.

The Torguts are usually mentioned as "Kalmuks." The word Kalmuk is Turkish and means something like "remnant of a tree." It is a kind of nickname and to-day is applied to various native tribes in Turkestan and Mongolia. But the Tatar clan of the story called themselves Torgut, the Giants, and that is their rightful name.

WAS Quetzal a Norseman? Theories concerning the early Aztecs and Toltecs are always interesting:

San Francisco.

Read the last six copies in Mexico. I guess everything will remain O. K. down there until they elect a new president. I understand that several new candidates are passing out election cards (ballots).

ONE of the comrades was asking the question, "Was Quetzal a Norseman."

Now, as I have done quite a little research work in Mexico, as well as Egypt, I would like to state that I think he was.

Here is a short synopsis of the life of Quetzal or Quetzalcoatl. The name has the same meaning as the Mayan Kukulcan or Quiche Gugumatz that is translated "plumed serpent." Quetzal was the chief deity of Cholula, one of Mexico's oldest cities still inhabited at the coming of the Spaniards. He was an early king of miraculous birth. His mother was a virgin ruler in the city of Tula (about 40 miles north of the present city of Mexico.)

He was entirely unlike his people (the Toltecs), having a fair skin and a long white beard and wearing a flaring white mantle with the figure of a cross embroidered on it in red. He took no wife, but founded convents for women sworn to chastity and devoted to temple worship. He taught peace and universal brotherhood and under his rule war was unknown.

By the very evil works of a wizard he was finally dethroned. Offering no resistance to this, he claimed that the time had came for him to return to his father, promising to come again with others in the year of Acatl, which was then far distant.

So he started on his journey, stopping 20 years at Cholula, where he taught the mysteries of his religion to the inhabitants who naturally became priests of his creed. The great pyramid at this city was the Mecca of the Aztec and Toltec religions. (Really they were one.) When he arrived at the seashore he sailed into the sunrise on a raft of serpents.

THIS is as much as can be given in a short space. In my mind there is no doubt that he was a Norseman. There is the fair skin, and the fact that he possessed a knowledge far superior to the untutored natives, so much so that it was thought divine. The pyramids of his religion, too, always made me think of the burial mounds of the early vikings which I have seen. That he preached peace instead of war proves very little, as on many of their cruises the vikings carried songsters and story-tellers who were never considered fighters. Also the fierce Toltec war god came into being during his reign or just after and was claimed to be his brother. So it might have been that after a fierce storm only two survivors arrived in Mexico from some ship. Perhaps one was a captive from some other country or perhaps Quetzal was a descendant of one of the men.

By the greatest freak of history the Spaniards landed in 1519, the year of Acatl.

Hope this answers all questions in this subject.—THE GRIZZLEY.

SOMETHING from Arthur Mallory of our writers' brigade concerning wourali or curare poison and its effect on game killed with darts dipped in it:

Southern Pines, North Carolina.

In Camp-Fire some time ago I saw a query about the use of arrow-poisons by South American Indians in killing game.

Practically all Central and South American Indians (such as use poisoned arrows at all) use the same poison—Wourara, Ouari, Urari, Wourali, Woorari, Curara, or Curare, as it is variously called. It is the dried juice of a species of Strychnos, a common enough plant in those regions; and its active principle is the alkaloid Curarine ($C_{18}H_{35}N$), which is highly poisonous. Its physiological action is to paralyze the end-plates of motor nerves. Thus, without affecting the central nervous system at all, it causes complete paralysis of all muscles. Death is due to paralysis of heart and respiratory-muscles, Curare has no other action; it does not affect consciousness nor is it anesthetic.

Though it has been used in tetanus (lock-jaw) in doses of 1-25 to 1-10 grain, it is rarely used as a medicine; but it is very largely used in laboratory experiments upon animals, because it does abolish the possibility of movement without affecting either consciousness or sensibility.

But all that is by the way. The important and interesting thing about curare is that it is inert unless introduced directly into the body-fluids. It can be swallowed even in large quantities without ill effects, because it is broken up in the stomach by the digestive process. Introduced into the blood-stream, however, by hypodermatic injection, or by a dart, knife or arrow impregnated with it, curare is highly poisonous. It acts almost instantly, paralyzing all muscles, so that its victim drops at once, inert. And that victim may be eaten with impunity, because as I have said, curare is broken up during digestion. (Of course, if one had a gastric ulcer or open wound of stomach, æsophagus or mouth, enough curare might enter the blood-stream to cause death; and I have seen one or two natives—in Brazil—die while eating game knocked over with curare-poisoned arrows, undoubtedly because of this very thing.) As a rule, it is perfectly safe, though, to eat game thus killed. I have done it myself.

So that settles the dispute about Indians eating game killed with poisoned arrows. Of course they do, as your correspondent (wasn't it Arthur O. Friel?) said they did. And that's why they can.—ARTHUR MALLORY.

YOU'LL be interested to know that we now have in the safe a sequel to J. Allan Dunn's "Barehanded Castaways," for which so many of you have been asking.

IN CONNECTION with his story in this issue Max Bonter tells us how he feels about the gandy, a name that may be as strange to you as it was to me, but a name for a real fellow:

Kent, N. Y.

I am tickled over the fact that the gandy is to have a chance in fiction at last. He is the gipsy of American working men. His outfits are part and parcel of practically every one of our railroads from Canada to Mexico. I have tamped ties and spiked rails shoulder to shoulder with him at various times from the St. Lawrence to the Rio Grande. Also I have kept his accounts and sold him his sox and shoe-laces, his scrap and his cigarets. I think I know the gandy about as well as anybody.

IT RATHER surprizes me that it should have fallen to my lot to introduce the gandy to the reading public. Many a time, during a free-for-all on a gandy pay-day, or on the occasion of a grub-strike or the summary chasing of a discredited hasher out of a camp, I've heard old-timers exclaim:

"Why in —— don't some lit'ry guy git hold o' this stuff an' write it up?"

The question-mark would sometimes be followed with an instinctive glance in my direction, because I had been caught once or twice jotting down "Chinese" on a slip of paper. I doubt, however, that any of the gandys really knew I was "a chiel amang them takin' notes."

ONCE I thought an old-timer had really spotted me. He was only a little gandy, but wise and wizened and old. Name was Ketchum. He'd gandied about everything in the U. S. that was gandyable—practically everything that consisted of rails. He and I worked as tamping partners for a while. I didn't talk much on the job—was either dancing the gandy or star-gazing. I had Ketchum guessing for two straight weeks. He couldn't quite sabe my strange and abstract mien. His eyes often tried to fathom what lay behind my reserve. There was a gulf between our natures that he couldn't jump over. He was suspicious.

Came pay-day. Then the inevitable rush to the fount of democracy.

"Pardner," said Ketchum to me, slamming his pay-roll upon the bar. "Have a drink!"

His wise old eyes were bent searchingly upon mine. I was up against the acid test of partnership with him, and I knew it.

"Sure," came promptly out of me. My foot swung familiarly to the foot-rail. My pay-roll lay beside Ketchum's. Our glasses clinked and two man-size old Hill & Hill (Hell & Hell, as they used to call it down South) splashed simultaneously into our thirsty gullets. Ketchum unlimbered. So did I. Within five minutes the two of us had left a trail of bull from the Bowery to the Barbary.

Ketchum's face cleared. His suspicions of my high lineage quickly vanished. He grinned a whole-hearted grin of palship.

"Now I'm wise t' y'u, pal," he grunted with relief. "Y'u're on'y a —— —— bum like meself! Drink up!"

THE "Commissary in the Hills" is somewhat allegorical. Society is bent upon reforming the roughneck, but I doubt that it will pay. The gandys (or in other words, the rough elements) of the country don't want near-beer and white collars. To have dollars in the bank may be an agreeable sensation for them for a time, but their needs are deeper. They need plenty of rope, plenty of pasture and a good orgy once in a while to clean them out, chasten them and keep them working. A gandy will stack himself up against a tough job and work brutally hard at it with *one* object in view—to have a good jamboree at the end of it. In one night he will gleefully dissipate the proceeds of a month's fierce labor, and then go dutifully back to the job and do it all over again. That's what puts the iron in his blood.

Some of the old-timers who read the "Commissary" may recall some of the incidents that inspired the story. I doubt that many of them will remember the author by name; although they might remember a red-faced guy who packed a fair wallop in his right, who pulled a poor bum from in front of an express cow-catcher one time, and who, whenever he had charge of a camp, never turned down a passing gandy for a bit of chow or a flop.—MAX BONTER.

AND here's something Mr. Bonter wrote me about the gandys some time ago. If his theory is correct, it's our magazine that introduces the gandys to fiction. Anyhow these men are worth knowing and there are seats for them at Camp-Fire.

Kent, N. Y.

Since the beginning of my acquaintance with him (ten years ago) this type has interested me. I like the gipsy part of him. He flits over the country with the idea—not of *dodging* work, but—of *looking* for it.

"WORK" in his vocabulary is more than a complacent term describing many a modern state of busyness. It means what it ought to mean—a straining of the faculties toward the accomplishment of a task. Not being much bothered with intellectualism, this of course does not particularly include a straining of his brain tissues; although they also, I fancy, must be brought somewhat into play to induce his muscles to strain themselves.

Well, work in gandy lingo means pick, shovel, lining-bar, spike-maul, straining muscles, ten hours a day. I'm confident that he himself doesn't understand why he likes hard work. On the other hand, if I told him bluntly that he did like it, he'd tell me I'm crazy.

HIS science isn't far enough advanced to explain to him just why "straining" himself makes a physical man of him. He can't just understand why it's easier for a physical man to be a real man than anybody else. His figuring is too elementary to teach him just why oxygen, rushing into his system ten or twelve hours a day, subtracts from his organism just one certain amount of dead cell-matter and stimulates his blood to add just one certain amount in its place of brand new tissue that keeps him moving and clean. His non-acquaintance with higher physiology leaves him in ignorance of the kernel that is growing in his shell, ready to blossom into character when acted upon by proper environment. If you told him that hard work was making a man out of him he'd call you a sky-pilot in disguise, or a Holy Joe.

He goes through life envying the man who "gets it easy"—wondering why he is "too dumb" to do the same.

He doesn't understand that he simply doesn't want the soft life—that it would destroy him—probably damn him. He is unable to appreciate the fact that he had developed away from the soft game and everything in connection with it—that it's good for him only once in a while, for a day or two, to take a look at and then get away from it and go back with a penitent heart to his shovel and his cinders and his clean air and his Spartan grub.

WELL, this isn't what you wanted to know—so far. I'm telling you I was interested in the gandy on account of these things, and on that account I followed him up and dissected him. I lived in his funny box-car outfits for several years—at various times—from the Canadian Pacific southward. I've worked for the C. P., G. T. R., T. H. & B., Wabash, N. Y. C., Lehigh, B. R. & P., J. C., N. Y., N. H. & H., St. L. S. W. (Cotton Belt), Santa Fe, and maybe one or two others that I haven't time to recall. Probably, all told, I didn't work for any of the mentioned roads longer than several months—for many of them, not longer than a couple of weeks—for some of them only a few days. My idea was just to get a line on a new outfit—work a while in a strange gang and see if I couldn't find some interesting atmospheres and characters.

NOW I'll try and get down to the brass tacks. Although I've been reading magazines for twenty-seven or twenty-eight years, I've never yet seen the term "gandy dancer" in print, excepting once, in my little tale "The Life of Riley," last October, when I referred to the hero as having been a gandy before he shipped on the *North King*.

Although I've seen thousands of magazines (many copies of *Adventure* among the number) lying around bunk-cars in gandy dancing camps, and although most of the gandys are readers and some of them fairly intelligent readers who would be tickled to death to see themselves in print—I've never yet heard a single one of them admit that he'd seen himself or any other gandy on a printed page. This includes newspapers as well as magazines.

It seems funny that I should be the one to broach the gandy. I always thought somebody might beat me to it before I was ready to talk. However, I imagine that passing vagabond scribes didn't stick with the gandy long enough to get really interested in him. The grub was probably too fierce—the tamping-pick and the rock ballast too specially backbreaking for their sense of humor.

I SUPPOSE the gandy dancers' first cousins, the section men, have been written about; although I just don't recall any fiction about them at present. Their work is often referred to in newspapers, however, at times of wreck. They usually live in their own homes, have families and don't voyage much from their own hearths. Nowadays they are usually Italian or Polish or Slavish or Swedish or Mexican Mestizos—according to the different sections of the country. The work they do is practically the same as the work required of the gandys.

The gandy outfits are vastly different. They usually travel in box-cars or rebuilt day-coaches—cook, eat and sleep in them. In a good gandy outfit the foremen eat with their men and travel with them in similar accommodations. In former days the gandys were made up almost entirely of Irish. In late years the American hobo has largely supplanted the Irishman; although many railroads to-day have a very strong gandy representation of Corkonians, Donegallers, Donneybrookers, Fardowners, etc.—that makes a gandy bunk-car often an uproariously amusing place to spread a man's blanket.—MAX BONTER.

ACCORDING to the papers a New York magistrate "has inaugurated the policy of fining food violators $1 for every pound of unwholesome food found in their possession." Apparently this policy is so severe that it is news and gets a box on the first page of a daily in the country's largest city. It would seem, too, that sellers of unfit food aren't very often punished in any way.

One fellow got a fine of $93 or five days for 93 pounds of candy "unfit for human consumption," another $90 for "faulty" almonds, a third $70 for "unfit" peanut-bars and walnut puffs. I wonder how many hundred or thousand others among New York's millions are selling food "unfit for human consumption?" I'll venture a chemist could go out and locate quite a little army of offenders almost any day. Nor has new York any monopoly on unfit food.

All sort of ridiculous, isn't it? I wonder just how much human damage 93 pounds of candy "unfit for human consumption could do? To a little child, say, or an adult already in a dangerous condition of health. Maybe quite a few cases of "ptomaine" and perhaps here or there, and maybe not for weeks afterward, a death. Quite possible, anyhow, isn't it? And the gent who hands it out gets $93 or five days. Such a severe penalty should amply satisfy the sorrowing family of any one who had passed out as a direct or indirect result of the selling of this kind of food. Also, so terrible a penalty hanging over their heads and put into operation so seldom that it becomes a matter of newspaper news will surely terrify all dealers out of ever again offering food unfit for human consumption. Probably never again, as always heretofore, will any dealer in candy, meat, groceries or vegetables ever offer to New York any food that isn't wholly fit. Five days! The awfulness of it makes the chills run down a fellow's back.

IT SEEMS to me mighty crude work to stab a man or shoot him or hit him with a club. That's "murder" or "manslaughter" and may cost you quite a few years in the penitentiary or even hang or electrocute you. Stupid and too risky. Why not just start a little food stand of some sort and get the man—or the woman or the little child—as a customer. No need for hurry. Take your time. Can't you afford to wait a few weeks or even months? Don't insist on direct and crude methods. Slow poison isn't always sure, but it will certainly do considerable harm and then who wouldn't rather take the rather faint risk of five days instead of the much greater risk of five years or the electric chair? Of course you're likely to poison a few hundred other people in whom you have no interest, but that's just part of the day's business. Don't be in a foolish hurry and give him or her arsenic or ground glass or anything like that for somebody to find when the remains are examined. Be more patient, play it safe, avoid the cell and the noose, keep your good standing in the community, do it with a rotten vegetable, a decayed fish or unfit candy.

Furthermore, if you're morally inclined, this method isn't wicked, while using a gun, knife or club is decidedly wicked. Just so your poison comes from a food-store instead of a drug-store, takes twenty-four hours or longer to act, and isn't dead sure to produce death, and just so, instead of disciminating against your victim, you poison a whole neighborhood, there isn't anything immoral about it—merely a little trick of the trade, a well-recognized business method and one likely to make you eventually a pillar of society, an honor and model for your community and perhaps a church-member of the first water. While on the other hand the worst you're likely to get is five days or a dollar a pound.

NOR has the public any sound reason to object. I put it to you personally—if a fellow sold you a pound of food that made you feel miserable for several days or maybe poisoned off one or two of your kids or anyhow ran you up a doctor's bill for them, wouldn't you feel more than amply satisfied if that fellow had to pay the city $1? He might, you know. It does happen sometimes, as the newspaper notice shows.

It's funny, though, when you come to think it over. The law soaks it to you if you beat a man up with your fist or a brick, or break a woman's arm or kick a child in the stomach, but if you're more subtle about it and do much the same thing in the way of business instead of for personal amusement, why, that costs you only five days maybe, probably not, or $1 per pound, which is a price any good sport or good business man ought to be willing to pay in the circumstances. Kick the little child's stomach from the *inside* and be safe, and cover up your tracks by doing it to a lot of them instead of just one, thus being able to prove lack of personal animus. Also, it's darned hard to prove anything on you anyway, even if some of 'em happen to die as a result of getting rotten food at just the wrong time.

I wonder just what the law means by "manslaughter" and "mayhem" and "assault?" And whether the law has any real relation to the facts of life—and death? I wonder just what "poisoning" means, and whether the poison victim and his relatives and friends care an awful lot whether the poison took a few minutes or a few weeks or months to get in its final work, or whether the poison came from a food-store or a drug-store? Somehow I can't quite see why poisoning people broadcast and by degrees as part of your regular business is a trivial matter, while poisoning just one fellow roughly and all at once is such a terrible and wicked affair.

Oh, well, let's go to lunch and take a chance. I'd rather be poisoned anyhow than do a little thinking, to say nothing of taking any action, wouldn't you? Sure we would. We're proving that all the time.

FOLLOWING Camp-Fire custom, John Joseph Scarry rises to introduce himself on the occasion of his first story in our magazine:

Brookline, Mass.

Long before the idea ever came to me that I might be able to write a story, I was a more or less constant reader of *Adventure* and ever a sincere admirer of the enthusiasm and the spirit of good-fellowship manifested by readers and writers in Camp-Fire. Primarily, I think, to earn the right to slip into your company, I wrote and offered "Partners," a humble offering, I am well aware.

MY LIFE has not been adventurous, except, perhaps, in mileage. Considerably more than a fifth of a century was spent in grooming me for some remunerative service in the jungle which lies between Massachusetts Bay and the Hudson River. Because of this, probably, I have spent the years since my entry into the world of affairs in the Dutch East Indies. There I developed a little any latent talent I may possess by pounding out vain exhortations to various and sundry American importers and exporters who chanced to employ me. The exhortations were vain, you will notice, so, just now, I am letting American Foreign Trade struggle along without me.

I have done some hunting and have climbed several volcanoes in Java. For a few months, during my only furlough, I vacationed in the army. Incidentally, I was promoted to corporal because I was the only man in my squad who could speak English. My proudest achievement is the three months I spent last Summer as a wiper on a Shipping Board freighter from Soerabaya to New York by way of the Mediterranean ports. But my life has never been threatened by howling savages, nor have I ever faced anything more dangerous than a disgruntled fellow-human with two fists.

I can only hope that the future will bring me opportunity to get better acquainted with you all.—JOHN JOSEPH SCARRY.

Our New Assaying Service

PLEASE note that in "A. A." we're offering a new service to readers. Not a free one, but one with charges so light that they are merely nominal when compared to the fee usually asked. H. C. Wire, formerly of our magazine's staff, will give a *general estimate* of what minerals are present in specimens sent him by readers. A dollar is asked for this service. Note carefully that only a *general estimate* is given, not the minute analysis usually given by professional assayers; but note also that the charge is only something like 1 to 25. The main point is the expert general opinion as to commercial value.

Questions on oil and minerals, not accompanied with samples, will be answered on the same general plan as in other sections of "A. A."

Neither Mr. Wire nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond fair dealing and sincere endeavor. Read over the conditions. Don't blame any one but yourself if you fail to get satisfactory reply through yourself failing to comply with all the necessary conditions.

Looks to me as if this service ought to be of decided value to quite a few of you. Let's try it out and see how it works. Suggestions welcomed.

Here's Mr. Wire's statement:

Specimens to be tested should be about half the size of a man's fist. They are best shipped by parcel post in a small canvas sack—one-pound salt bag will do—or they can be wrapped and put in a cigar-box.

Samples should be carefully marked with sender's name. Letters concerning samples will have to come separately, so it is important that both letter and sample have sender's name attached.

As a guide to me, letter should tell something of the country from which rock sample comes—something of the mass in which it occurs—a description of other rocks about it. Also what mining activities, if any, are being carried on in the locality. *State What Particular Mineral is Sought in Sample.*

But don't tell exact location or anything that might give away a good find.

Samples can not be returned, as they are usually destroyed in process of analysis.

I will give a *general estimate* of what minerals are present, telling whether or not the sample submitted seems to indicate an ore of commercial value.

ALSO questions answered regarding possible indications of oil. This can be but a rough opinion. However, surface conditions of the country often indicate whether the chances of there being oil beneath are good, slight, or not at all.

A general description of the lay of the land should be given, stating whether mountainous, hilly or flat, position of rock-beds if exposed, and kind of rock.

In this I can help greatly by referring the inquirer to State and U. S. geological survey bulletins which may give valuable information on exact locality from which inquiry comes.

Qualifications: Prep school and University courses in mineralogy, crystallography and geology. Field work for the U. S. Geological Survey. Oil geology for the Texas Company. Independent rock-hounding in California.

Besides my own outfit I have access to the laboratory of Pomona College of California.

I assume no obligation or responsibility beyond honesty and best endeavor.

Address:—H. C. WIRE, Chino, California.

VARIOUS PRACTICAL SERVICES TO READER

These services of *Adventure*, mostly free, are open to any one. They involve much time, work and expense on our part, but we ask in return only that you **read and observe the simple rules**, thus saving needless delay and trouble for us. The whole spirit of the magazine is one of friendliness. No formality between editors and readers. Whenever we can help we're ready and willing to try. **Remember: Magazines are made up ahead of time. Allow for two or three months between sending and publication.**

Identification Cards

Free to any reader. Just send us (1) your name and address, (2) name and address of party to be notified, (3) a stamped and self-addressed return envelope.

Each card bears this inscription, each printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of *Adventure*, New York, stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one or two friends, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. Names and addresses treated as confidential. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for business identification. Cards furnished free *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application.* We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Metal Cards—For twenty-five cents we will send you, *post-paid*, the same card in aluminum composition, perforated at each end. Enclose a self-addressed return envelope, but no postage. Twenty-five cents covers everything. Give same data as for pasteboard cards. Holders of pasteboard cards can be registered under both pasteboard and metal cards if desired, but old numbers can not be duplicated on metal cards. If you no longer wish your old card, destroy it carefully and notify us, to avoid confusion and possible false alarms to your friends registered under that card.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give in full the names and addresses of self and friend or friends when applying.*

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Expeditions and Employment

While we should like to be of aid in these matters, experience has shown that it is not practicable.

Back Issues of *Adventure*

The Boston Magazine Exchange, 24 T *Wharf, Boston, Mass., can supply* Adventure *back through* 1918, *and occasional copies before that.*

WILL SELL: All issues from June, 1919, to March 30th, 1922. Ten cents each and postage.—Address Walter Litter, Kenwood, Helena, Mont.

WILL SELL: Jan., Feb., March, April, August, Sept., May, 1916. Feb., March, July, Oct., Dec., 1917; Both issues January, Feb., May, June, July, 1st March, 1st Dec. 1918. All issues April to December, 1919. Both issues Jan., Feb., March, Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec., 1st April, 1st July, and 2nd August, 1920; all issues 1921 except 1st Sept., and 1st Oct., price $9.00 complete; plus express charges. No single copies.—Address Joseph Holbert, Hope Valley, Box 165, R. I.

WILL SELL: All issues October and November, 1920. All issues Jan. to first July, first Sept. and first Dec., 1921. All 1922, to date, except first Jan. and first Feb. Ten cents per copy. Or will exchange for *Adventures* prior to 1920.—Address R. T. Harbert, 124 Church St., Brighton, N. J.

WILL SELL: All issues 1918, 1919. All issues 1921, except first May.—Address John C. Gable, 8738 Centerline Ave., Detroit, Mich.

WILL SELL: May, 1917, first May 1917. All issues 1919, 1920, 1921. Perfect condition. Twenty-five cents per copy.—Address J. Bruce Sullivan, Box 231, Lynn, Mass.

Manuscripts

Glad to look at any manuscript. We have no "regular staff" of writers. A welcome for new writers. *It is not necessay to write asking to submit your work.*

When submitting a manuscript, if you write a letter concerning it, enclose it *with* the manuscript; do *not* send it under separate cover. Enclose stamped and addressed envelope for return. All manuscripts should be typewritten double-spaced, with wide margins, not rolled, name and address on first page. We assume no risk for manuscripts or illustrations submitted, but use all due care while they are in our hands. Payment on acceptance.

We want only clean stories. Sex, morbid, "problem," psychological and supernatural stories barred. Use almost no fact-articles. Can not furnish or suggest collaborators. use fiction of almost any length; under 3,000 welcomed.

Camp-Fire Stations

Our Camp-Fire is extending its Stations all over the world. Any one belongs who wishes to. Any member desiring to meet those who are still hitting the trails may maintain a Station in his home or shop where wanderers may call and receive such hospitality as the Keeper wishes to offer. The only requirements are that the Station display the regular sign, provide a box for mail to be called for and keep the regular register book and maintain his Station in good repute. Otherwise Keepers run their Stations to suit themselves and are not responsible to this magazine or representative of it. List of Stations and further details are published in the Camp-Fire in the first issue of each month.

Camp-Fire Buttons

To be worn on lapel of coat by members of Camp-Fire—any one belongs who wishes to. Enameled in dark colors representing earth, sea and sky, and bears the numeral 71—the sum of the letters of the word Camp-Fire valued according to position in the alphabet. Very small and inconspicuous. Designed to indicate the common interest which is the only requisite for membership in Camp-Fire and to enable members to recognize each other when they meet in far places or at home. Twenty-five cents, post-paid, anywhere.

When sending for the button enclose a strong, self-addressed, *un*stamped envelope.

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Missing Friends or Relatives

(*See Lost Trails*)

Mail Address and Forwarding Service

This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding address for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied. Unclaimed mail which we have held for a long period is listed on the last page of the last issue of each month.

Addresses

Camp-Fire—Any one belongs who wishes to.

Rifle Clubs—Address Nat. Rifle Ass'n of America, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Washington, D. C.

(*See also under "Standing Information" in "Ask Adventure."*)

Ask Adventure

A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts.

QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the section in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert may give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service (except our assaying and oil services) free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached,* are enclosed. (See footnote at bottom of page.) Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose section it seems to belong.**

1. The Sea Part 1

BERIAH BROWN, 1624 Bigelow Ave., Olympia, Wash. Ships, seamen and shipping; nautical history, seamanship, navigation, yachting, small-boat sailing; commercial fisheries of North America; marine bibliography of U. S.; fishing-vessels of the North Atlantic and Pacific banks. (*See next section.*)

2. ★ The Sea Part 2 British Waters

CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, care *Adventure*. Seamanship, navigation, old-time sailorizing, ocean-cruising, etc. Questions on the sea, ships and men local to the British Empire go to Captain Dingle, not Mr. Brown.

3. ★ Islands and Coasts Part 1 Islands of Indian and Atlantic Oceans; the Mediterranean; Cape Horn and Magellan Straits

CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, care *Adventure*. Ports, trade, peoples, travel. (*See next section*).

4. Islands Part 2 Haiti, Santo Domingo, Porto Rico and Virgin Group

CHARLES BELL EMERSON, 90 South Orchard St., San José, Calif. Languages, mining, minerals, fishing, sugar, fruit and tobacco production.

5. ★ New Zealand; and the South Sea Islands Part 1 Cook Islands, Samoa

TOM L. MILLS, *The Feilding Star*, Feilding, New Zealand. Travel, history, customs; adventure, exploring, sport. (*Postage 8 cents.*)

6. South Sea Islands Part 2

CHARLES BROWN, JR., 213 E St., San Rafael, Calif. French Oceania (Tahiti, the Society, Paumoto, Marquesas); islands of Western Pacific (Solomons, New Hebrides, Fiji, Tonga); of Central Pacific (Guam, Ladrone, Pelew, Caroline, Marshall, Gilbert, Ellice); of the Detached (Wallis, Penrhyn, Danger, Easter, Rotuma, Futuna, Pitcairn). Inhabitants, history, travel, sports, equipment, climate, living conditions, commerce, pearling, vanilla and coconut culture.

7. ★ Australia and Tasmania

ALBERT GOLDIE, Sydney Press Club, 51 Elizabeth St., Sydney, Australia. Customs, resources, travel, hunting, sports, history. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

8. Malaysia, Sumatra and Java

FAY-COOPER COLE, Ph. D., Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Ill. Hunting and fishing, exploring, commerce, inhabitants, history, institutions.

9. New Guinea

DR. ALBERT BUELL LEWIS, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Ill. Hunting and fishing, exploring, commerce, inhabitants, history, institutions.

10. Philippine Islands

BUCK CONNOR, P. O. Box 202, Hollywood, Calif. History, inhabitants, topography, customs, travel, hunting, fishing, minerals, agriculture, commerce.

11. Hawaiian Islands and China

F. J. HALTON, 714 Marquette Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Customs, travel, natural history, resources, agriculture, fishing, hunting.

12. Japan

GRACE P. T. KNUDSON, Castine, Me. Commerce, politics, people, customs, history, geography, travel, agriculture, art, curios.

13. Asia, Southern

CAPTAIN BEVERLEY GIDDINGS, 1315 Josephine St., New Orleans, La. Arabia, Persia, India, Tibet, Burma, western China, Borneo. Hunting, exploring, traveling, customs.

★ *(Enclose addressed envelop with 5 cents—in Mr. Beadle's case 12 cents—in stamps NOT attached)*

14. Africa Part 1 Gold, Ivory and Fever Coasts of West Africa, Niger River to Jebba, Northern Nigeria
THOMAS S. MILLER, Carmel, Monterey Co., Calif. Canoeing, labor, trails, trade, expenses, outfitting, flora, tribal histories, witchcraft.

15. ★ Africa Part 2 Transvaal, N. W. and Southern Rhodesia, British East, Uganda and the Upper Congo
CHARLES BEADLE, Île de Lerne, par Vannes, Morbihan, Brittany, France. Geography, hunting, equipment, trading, climate, transport, customs, living conditions, witchcraft, adventure and sport. (*Postage 12 cents.*)

16. Africa Part 3 Cape Colony, Orange River Colony, Natal and Zululand
CAPTAIN F. J. FRANKLIN, care Adventurers' Club of Chicago, 40 South Clark St., Chicago, Ill. Climate, shooting and fishing, imports and exports; health resorts, minerals, direct shipping routes from U. S., living conditions, travel, opportunities for employment. Free booklets on: Orange-growing, apple-growing, sugar-growing, maize-growing; viticulture; sheep and fruit ranching.

17. ✠ Africa Part 4 Portuguese East
R. G. WARING, Corunna, Ontario, Canada. Trade, produce, climate, opportunities, game, wild life, travel, expenses, outfits, health, etc. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

18. Africa Part 5 Morocco
GEORGE E. HOLT, care *Adventure*. Travel, tribes, customs, history, topography, trade.

19. Africa Part 6 Tripoli
CAPTAIN BEVERLEY GIDDINGS, 1315 Josephine Street, New Orleans, La. Including the Sahara Tuaregs and caravan routes. Traveling, exploring, customs, caravan trade.

20. Africa Part 7 Egypt and Barbary States
J. L. BINDA, National Foreign Trade Council, 1 Hanover Sq., New York. Egypt and Sudan, Tunis, Algeria. Travel, history, ancient and modern; monuments, languages, races, customs, commerce.

21. Turkey and Asia Minor
J. L. BINDA, National Foreign Trade Council, 1 Hanover Sq., New York. Travel, history, geography, races, languages, customs, trade opportunities.

22. Balkans, except Albania
J. L. BINDA, National Foreign Trade Council, 1 Hanover Sq., New York. Greece, Jugo-Slavia, Bulgaria, Roumania. Travel, history, topography, languages, customs, trade opportunities.

23. Albania
ROBERT S. TOWNSEND, 1447 Irving St. N. W., Washington, D. C. History, politics, customs, languages, inhabitants, sports, travel, outdoor life.

24. Scandinavia
ROBERT S. TOWNSEND, 1447 Irving St. N. W., Washington, D. C. History, politics, customs, languages, inhabitants, sports, travel, outdoor life.

25. Germany, Czecho-Slovakia, Austria, Poland
FRED F. FLEISCHER, Room 308, 26 Broadway, New York. History, politics, customs, languages, trade opportunities, travel, sports, outdoor life.

26. South America Part 1 Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure*. Geography, inhabitants, history, industries, topography, minerals, game, languages, customs.

27. South America Part 2 Venezuela, the Guianas, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina
P. H. GOLDSMITH, *Inter-American Magazine*, 407 West 117th St., New York, N. Y. Travel, history, customs, industries, topography, inhabitants, languages, hunting and fishing.

28. Central America
CHARLES BELL EMERSON, 90 So. Orchard St., San José, Calif. Canal Zone, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala. Travel, languages, game, conditions, minerals, trading.

29. Mexico Part 1 Northern
J. W. WHITEAKER, 1505 W. 10th St., Austin, Tex. Border States of old Mexico—Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. Minerals, lumbering, agriculture, travel, customs, topography, climate, inhabitants, hunting, history, industries.

30. Mexico Part 2 Southern; and Lower California
C. R. MAHAFFEY, Topolobampo, Sinaloa, Mexico. Lower California; Mexico south of a line from Tampico to Mazatlan. Mining, agriculture, topography, travel, hunting, lumbering, history, inhabitants, business and general conditions.

31. ✠ Canada Part 1 Height of Land and Northern Quebec
S. E. SANGSTER ("Canuck"), L. B. 393, Ottawa, Canada. Also Ontario (except strip between Minn. and C. P. Ry.); southeastern Ungava and Keewatin. Sport, canoe routes, big game, fish, fur; equipment; Indian life and habits; Hudson's Bay Co. posts; minerals, timber, customs regulations. No questions answered on trapping for profit. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

32. ✠ Canada Part 2 Ottawa Valley and Southeastern Ontario
HARRY M. MOORE, Deseronto, Ont., Canada. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, mining, lumbering, agriculture, topography, travel, camping, aviation. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

33. ✠ Canada Part 3 Georgian Bay and Southern Ontario
GEORGE L. CATTON, Tweed, Ont., Canada. Fishing, hunting, trapping, canoeing. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

34. Canada Part 4 Hunters Island and English River District
T. F. PHILLIPS, Department of Science, Duluth Central High School, Duluth, Minn. Fishing, camping, hunting, trapping, canoeing, climate, topography, travel.

35. Canada Part 5 Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta
ED. L. CARSON, Mount Vernon, Wash. Including Peace River district; to Great Slave Lake. Outfits and equipment, guides, big game, minerals, forest, prairie; travel; customs regulations.

36. ✠ Canada Part 6 Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Mackenzie and Northern Keewatin
REECE H. HAGUE, The Pas, Manitoba, Canada. Homesteading, mining, hunting, trapping, lumbering and travel. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

37. ✠ Canada Part 7 New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Southeastern Quebec
JAS. F. B. BELFORD, Codrington, Ont., Canada. Hunting, fishing, lumbering, camping, trapping, auto and canoe trips, history, topography, farming, homesteading, mining, paper industry, water-power. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

38. Alaska
THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 2837 Fulton St., Berkeley, Calif. Arctic life and travel; boats, packing, back-packing, traction, transport, routes; equipment, clothing, food; physics, hygiene; mountain work.

39. Baffinland and Greenland
VICTOR SHAW, Shaw Mines Corp., Silverton, Colo. Hunting, expeditions, dog-team work, whaling, geology, ethnology (Eskimo).

40. Western U. S. Part 1 Calif., Ore., Wash., Nev., Parts of Utah and Ariz.
E. E. HARRIMAN, 2303 W. 23rd St., Los Angeles, Calif. Except portions mentioned below. Game, fur, fish; camp, cabin; mines, minerals; mountains.

41. Western U. S. Part 2 Parts of Utah and Ariz.
VICTOR SHAW, Shaw Mines Corp., Silverton, Colo. Cliff Dwellings, Two Grey Peaks, the Carrizo Mts., Cañon De Chelley, Chin Lee Wash, the Moonlight Country, the Blue Mts. (Utah), Navaho Indian Reservation in general. Pack trips, prospecting, hunting, camping, trapping and mining; habits, etc., of Navaho Indians.

42. Western U. S. Part 3 Colo. and Wyo.
FRANK MIDDLETON, 168 North End St., Laramie, Wyo. Geography, agriculture, stock-raising, mining, hunting, fishing, trapping, camping and outdoor life in general.

43. Western U. S. Part 4 Mont. and the Northern Rocky Mountains
CHESTER C. DAVIS, Helena, Mont. Agriculture, mining, northwestern oil-fields, hunting, fishing, camping, automobile tours, guides, early history.

44. Western U. S. Part 5 Idaho and Surrounding Country
OTTO M. JONES, Warden, Bureau of Fish and Game, Boise, Idaho. Camping, shooting, fishing, equipment, information on expeditions, outdoor photography, history and inhabitants.

45. Western U. S. Part 6 Tex. and Okla.
J. W. WHITEAKER, 1505 W. 10th St., Austin, Tex. Minerals, agriculture, travel, topography, climate, hunting, history, industries.

46. Middle Western U. S. Part 1 The Dakotas, Neb., Ia., Kan.
JOSEPH MILLS HANSON (lately Capt. A. E. F.), care *Adventure*. Hunting, fishing, travel. Especially, early history of Missouri Valley.

47. Middle Western U. S. Part 2 Mo. and Ark.
JOHN B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Also the Missouri Valley up to Sioux City, Iowa. Wilder countries of the Ozarks, and swamps; hunting, fishing, trapping, farming, mining and range lands; big-timber sections.

48. Middle Western U. S. Part 3 Ind., Ill., Mich., Wis., Minn. and Lake Michigan
J. B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Fishing, clamming, hunting, trapping, lumbering, canoeing, camping, guides, outfits, motoring, agriculture, minerals, natural history, early history, legends.

49. Middle Western U. S. Part 4 Mississippi River
GEO. A. ZERR, Vine and Hill Sts., Crafton, P. O., Ingram, Pa. Routes, connections, itineraries; all phases of river steamer and power-boat travel; history and idiosyncrasies of the river and its tributaries. Questions regarding methods of working one's way should be addressed to Mr. Spears. (*See next section.*)

✠ (*Enclose addressed envelop with 3 cents in stamps NOT attached*)

50. Eastern U. S. Part 1 Miss., O., Tenn., Michigan and Hudson Valleys, Great Lakes, Adirondacks
Raymond S. Spears, Little Falls, N. Y. Automobile, motor-cycle, bicycle and pedestrian touring; shanty-boating, river-tripping; outfit suggestions, including those for the transcontinental trails; game, fish and woodcraft; furs, fresh-water pearls, herbs.

51. Eastern U. S. Part 2 Motor-Boat and Canoe Cruising on Delaware and Chesapeake Bays and Tributary Rivers
Howard A. Shannon, *Alexandria Gazette*, Alexandria, Va. Motor-boat equipment and management. Oystering, crabbing, eeling, black bass, pike, sea-trout, croakers; general fishing in tidal waters. Trapping and trucking on Chesapeake Bay. Water fowl and upland game in Maryland and Virginia. Early history of Delaware, Virginia, and Maryland.

52. Eastern U. S. Part 3 Tenn., Ala., Miss., N. and S. C., Fla. and Ga.
Hapsburg Liebe, Orlando, Fla. Except Tennessee River and Atlantic seaboard. Hunting, fishing, camping; logging, lumbering, sawmilling, saws.

53. Eastern U. S. Part 4 Maine
Dr. G. E. Hathorne, 70 Main Street, Bangor, Me. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, guides, outfits, supplies.

OUR ASSAYING and OIL SERVICES

H. C. Wire, Chino, Calif. If all conditions are complied with, a *general estimate* as to composition and commercial value will be given from ore specimens submitted. Specimens half the size of a man's fist, in canvas bag, cigar-box or other strong wrapping; preferably by parcel post; *always marked with sender's name and address.* Separate letter telling general nature of locality, mass of rocks where found and of neighboring rocks; what local mining activities; *what particular mineral is sought in sample;* nothing that gives away exact location. Samples (usually destroyed in analysis) will not be returned. Charge: $1 per sample.

Oil. A rough general opinion given on oil indications. Give general description of lay of land as to hills, exposed rock-beds, kind of rock. (Can help also by referring inquirer to U. S. Geol. Survey bulletins that may bear on locality.) No questions as to stocks, companies or investments answered. Charge: 50 cents per locality.

No responsibility assumed by either the magazine or me beyond honesty and sincere endeavor. Name and address of sender will not even be passed on to the magazine in case inquiry and answer are sent it for publication.

OLD SONGS THAT MEN HAVE SUNG

Robert Frothingham, 745 Riverside Drive, New York City. A department for collecting hitherto unpublished specimens and for answering questions concerning all songs of the out-of-doors that have had sufficient virility to outlast their immediate day; chanteys, "forebitters," ballads—songs of outdoor men—sailors, lumberjacks, soldiers, cowboys, pioneers, rivermen, canal-men, men of the Great Lakes, voyageurs, railroad men, miners, hoboes, plantation hands, etc.

WEAPONS, PAST and PRESENT

Rifles, shotguns, pistols, revolvers, ammunition and edged weapons. (Any questions on the arms adapted to a particular locality should *not* be sent to this department but to the "Ask Adventure" editor covering the district.)

A.—All Shotguns, including foreign and American makes; wing shooting. J. B. Thompson, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

B.—All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers, including foreign and American makes. Donegan Wiggins, R. F. D. 3, Lock Box 75, Salem, Ore.

C.—Edged Weapons, and Firearms Prior to 1800. Swords, pikes, knives, battle-axes, etc., and all firearms of the flintlock, matchlock, wheel-lock and snaphaunce varieties. Lewis Appleton Barker, 40 University Road, Brookline, Mass.

FISHING IN NORTH AMERICA

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing

J. B. Thompson, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Covering fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting and bait; camping-outfits; fishing-trips.

MOUNTAINS and MOUNTAINEERING

Especially of New England. Arthur Bent, Appalachian Mountain Club, 1050 Tremont Bldg., Boston, Mass.

STANDING INFORMATION

For information on trade in any part of the world, address J. L. Binda, National Foreign Trade Council, 1 Hanover Sq., New York.

For general information on U. S. and its possessions, write Supt. of Public Documents, Wash., D. C., for catalog of all Government publications.

For the Philippines, Porto Rico, and customs receiverships in Santo Domingo and Haiti, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dept., Wash., D. C.

For Alaska, the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For Hawaii, Hawaii Promotion Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Honolulu, T. H. Also, Dept. of the Interior, Wash., D. C.

For Cuba, Bureau of Information, Dept. of Agri., Com. and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

The Pan-American Union may be called upon for general information relating to Latin-American matters or for specific data. Address L. S. Rowe, Dir. Gen., Wash., D. C.

For R. C. M. P., Commissioner Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can. Only unmarried British subjects, age 18 to 40, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs.

For Canal Zone, the Panama Canal Com., Wash., D. C.

For U. S., its possessions and most foreign countries, the Dept. of Com., Wash., D. C.

United States Revolver Ass'n. W. A. Morrall, Sec'y-Treas., Hotel Virginia, Columbus, O.

Scandinavia

WITH a few words concerning vikings, fish, game, and one of the most beautiful railroad trips in the world:

Question:—"I would like to get information about Norway, its people, customs and lingo. My great-grandfather was born in the land of the midnight sun. Were the vikings the first to arrive in America?

I'm going over to Norway shortly, and I would like to know where I should apply to get permission to land. I intend to go hunting and fishing.

How are the people to get along with? Is it very hard to learn the languages? What kinds of game and fish are to be found? It will be a great help for me to have your advice and information."—Julius Helberg, City Point, Va.

Answer, by Mr. Townsend:—Coming as you do from Norwegian stock, you naturally know something concerning the people and their country. However, in addition I would say that they are a very stolid, substantial race. Those people living in the interior and in the remote parts of the country are very reserved. The other parts of the population living along the lines of communication or on the sea coast are of course in a sense broader than their mountaineer brothers.

In general life is taken more seriously over there than in this country. Family life is made a great deal of, as are all feast days and occasions, such as weddings, Christmas, New Year, etc. But, even though you may be in a very out-of-the-way part of the country, you will never fail to find them most hospitable and kindly in every way. And having Norwegian blood in your veins will be an extra asset in getting to know their intimate thoughts, ideas and customs.

The "lingo" you also must have heard something about. If you have never seen it and want to get an idea about it I should advise you to write to Brentano's Book-Store, 1200 F Street, Washington, D. C., and obtain an English-Norwegian phrase book, which will be of value to you in your travels as well as letting you get a glance at the way the language looks. Ask for the Universal Series. The book is twenty-five cents.

Information concerning the arrival of the vikings upon the shores of the North American continent is very vague. The old Norse and Icelandic sagas set forth at great length about Leif Ericson, who in 1,000 A.D. is said to have sailed over to some part of what is now New England and called it Vinland. But most of this information is not authentic. It is based upon the old sagas concerning these old sea-rovers, and may or may not be true. Nevertheless, true or not, the vikings certainly were a bold lot of seafaring men, and did make very daring trips considering the ships they used.

As to the fish and game.

Along the coast you will find about the same fish as we have along the Maine coast, and lots of salmon, the canning of which is one of the largest industries in Norway. In the interior and lakes you will find trout.

In the north and interior you will find elk, reindeer and a few bear.

When you go over to the eastern part of the country in the south along the Swedish border you will find all kinds of birds.

To shoot or fish it will be necessary for you to get a permit for both. This is easily obtained and costs very little.

Then when you decide where you will shoot it is demanded you get permission from the local municipality in which you are going to hunt or fish. This permit is also easily obtained at a small cost.

Thus you will have no trouble on that score.

About one month before you go you must write to the Department of State, Washington, D. C. (Bureau for American Passports), and ask for an application for a passport, which will be sent you with the necessary instruction for filling it out.

When you have obtained your American passport (without it you could not leave the United States) as you will probably sail from New York, you can leave your home about two days earlier than necessary to catch your ship and get it visaed (stamped) by the Norwegian Consul-General in New York. His office is in the New York telephone book.

This is also absolutely necessary, as you could not land in Norway without it.

There are two steamer lines going from New York to Norway, both having fortnightly sailing. They are the Norwegian-American Line (Norwegian), and the Skandinavian-American Line, (Danish).

Both are very good, with excellent ships and very good rooms, service and meals.

Both also make the same ports of call; namely, Bergen, Christiansand and Kristiania, in the order named.

If you will take a suggestion from me I should advise you to leave the ship at Bergen, then go to Kristiania by railroad. This trip is one of the most beautiful in the whole world and should never be missed if you can afford to take it.

The ideal time to leave would be about the middle of July. You could then have some time to look around before the shooting season begins, which is for birds the twenty-third of August and for elk, reindeer, etc., the first of September.

I do hope you enjoy your trip. I know you will. Once you have seen the country and got to know the people you will be proud of that Norwegian blood of yours.

The full statement of the departments, as given in this issue, is printed only in alternate issues.

He Prefers the Tarp

WHY? Oh, just in case a footless friend should decide to bunk in with him:

Question:—"The writer is figuring on going on a hiking trip into the Sierra Nevadas in the Feather River region, hitting the trails.

What in your opinion is best to take, a blanket or a sleeping-bag; and why?

What are the necessities in food and equipment to carry?

Will the Forestry Service furnish me with maps of the Sierras from north to south either free or by paying for them?

To what Forestry office should I send to get the maps?

From the above questions you can of course tell that I am an absolute novice in the hiking game, but am willing to try.

A stamped envelop is enclosed."—HENRY C. LIND, San Francisco, Calif.

Answer, by Mr. Harriman:—I prefer blankets and a tarp. The tarp I use is fourteen feet long by six wide. I lay it out and spread my blankets on one end. Then I bring the other end up over the bed. It has all the bag has in the way of comfort, and it can be used for many other things; for instance, it may be stretched to make a roof to keep out rain or sun.

Then, too, it gives me a chance to slide out of one side if a rattler comes in the other. Having known a friend to entertain a rattler in a sleeping-bag and not know how to get out unbitten, I shy at bags.

Another man, armed with a club, beat the snake to death while it was still in the bag beside the man.

Go to 114 Sansome St., San Francisco, and get a copy of "The Handbook for Campers" from the Forest Service headquarters. That tells you more than ten letters, about packing, camping, food supplies, etc.

There is where you get your maps, also. They are free, and so is the handbook. Observe the rules in the book and you will have no trouble with the rangers.

Fauna of South America

WHERE they dig for fish with a pick and shovel:

Question:—"Please furnish me with information you may have about the higher altitudes of South America in regard to hunting and trapping for fur-bearing animals."—E. O. GAROUTTE, Green River, Wyo.

Answer, by Mr. Young:—The following is a partial list of animals, both game and otherwise, some fur-bearing: Tapir, guanaco or wild llama, alpaca, vicuña, deer, viscacha, puma, jaguar, ocelot, spectacled bear, coati, peccary, rabbit, squirrel, capybara (water hog), guagua, sloth, armadillo, opossum, skunk, weasel, otter, cavia, paca, outia, wildcat, coypu (beaver), chinchilla (a rat-like animal), tuco-tuco, dasypus, pichiciego. And in the sea we find sea-otters, seals, sea-elephants and dolphins. The birds range from the giant stork eight feet tall (jabiru or bata) down to the smallest of humming-birds.

Fish of all sizes—including the lung-fish of the chaco, which breathes only air and buries itself for months until the earth is dry and sandy overhead. This fish is dug with a pick and shovel in places where there has been no water for eighteen months and whose location is known by a small hole the fish leaves to breathe through. They grow up to three feet long and store fat on their tails for keeping them through the long dry seasons. There is a certain eel that does likewise. These two are in the chaco country, a district of two hundred and fifty thousand square miles on the borders of Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentine.

The best game country is half-way down the slopes of the Andes on the eastern slopes, where any amount of game can be killed daily. Canoe parties running merchandise carry little provisions for this stretch and depend on what they kill as they travel along.

The tails of alligators up to three and four feet long are good eating when roasted. Over that length they are musty tasting. The natives, however, eat all sizes when other grub is scarce although the expression "*come-cayman*" ("alligator-eater") is a term of reproach with them.

I would suggest the country across the Andes from Quito, Ecuador. It is a 78-mile hike trip from there to Napo, and you don't have to go all the way to Napo but can stop up around Archidona and head along the Andes on the Napo and Cururay rivers. You will be able to kill plenty of game and also live from natural resources of the country.

Please note check list I am attaching.

Rearing a One-Man Dog

BUCK CONNOR'S way:

Question:—"Although this is outside of your regular line as 'Ask Adventure' editor, I am taking the liberty of asking you a question, so if you can not answer it, and yet know some one who can, please advise me. I am asking you because you are acquainted with the West. I want a real one-man dog, who will not make up and be friends with everybody, and have tried several breeds, but can not find what I want. I understand a wolf if raised as pet makes a pretty good one, but is dangerous to other people, so I thought of crossing a dog and a wolf. Would this give me what I want? If so, could I buy such a pup?

Had thought of getting wolf pup and raising it and breeding for myself. Yet I understand a wolf is bad to howl at night, so I would not be allowed to keep one in town. Is this true if one is raised as pet?

Which is best cross, male dog and female wolf or *vice versa?* What kind of dog would you advise to use? This is awfully long-winded; but please excuse and I will not bother you often."—J. RICHARD HALL, East Liverpool, O.

Answer, by Mr. Connor:—Inasmuch as you have placed your question up to me, and recalling some experience along the lines of cross-breeding, I will say:

1. A one-man dog can be reared only as follows: Take a mere puppy; allow no one to play with it, much less pet it. If any one comes near it have him use a small stick and whip the dog—then when he comes to you, you pet the animal. That gives the dog complete confidence in you alone. This might seem purely theory, but by experience I know whereof I speak.

I took the litter of an Airedale bitch of high breeding before their eyes were opened and used a metal whistle to acquaint them with the sound of it as they licked milk from my finger-tips. At the age of three weeks they would follow that whistle with little yelps and bounds over stick and undergrowth that was almost too much for them. At the age of one month I had the litter—six pups—to heel, advancing, answering action by the calling of their names. This might seem impossible; but I have much proof for it.

2. The wolf when raised as a pet makes quite a good animal—sometimes, depending again upon his early raising. I would not advise a wolf in the city.

3. Have you tried a German police dog? Why not? Go and see "The Silent Call," a feature photoplay, and see Strongheart work. He was directed in German, through the medium of megaphone, and worked like a human over half a mile distant from camera.

4. I captured a bitch coyote in 1917 while trapping in Feather River, Calif. I kept her closely guarded and bred her to a thoroughbred Airedale dog. I kept her for two months, and while I was down in southern California, she finally got away from the old prospector—who was nearly blind—I'd left her with, and went back to her band. I wonder what I missed in a one-man dog, by losing her.

I have seen half-coyote and half Italian shepherds with sheep-herders in the mountains. But write to Mr. Hornaday, New York Zoo, New York City—he knows from experiments.

Orient—Levant

WHICH is which? This may start something, as the terms are more or less indefinite. Anyhow, Mr. Binda has his ideas on the subject clear in his mind:

Question:—"Would you kindly advise me what is the difference between the Orient and the Levant; what countries are included in the Orient?"—ANN MILLAR, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Answer, by Mr. Binda:—Replying to your inquiry, I would state that the "Orient" is usually that part of Asia, south of the Himalayas and including the Malayan Islands as far as the Philippines, also Borneo and Java; that is, all the territory included between longitude 70° to 170° East and from the equator to about 30° North. The countries bordering the Mediterranean from Italy eastward, as well as those running back to the Euphrates and including the coast of Syria, Asia Minor and Egypt, are known as the "Levant."

In ancient times the term "Orient" was not used, and that country was then known as the "High Levant." In common parlance any country east of Suez is known as the "Orient."

If you want an answer, read the rules.

Big-Game Counties of Wyoming

LOTS of homestead land there, too:

Question:—"I feel that you would be kind enough to answer a query in regard to Wyoming. Find an addressed envelop enclosed.

I am a soldier at present, but contemplate leaving the service with two other young men and going to some section of Wyoming and take homesteads. Could you tell me the best section of the State to go to where we could make money trapping and hunting while we are proving up on the homesteads? I would also like all information you could give me about the requirements for taking a homestead."—CPL. C. E. BRACKIN, Camp Travis, Texas.

Answer, by Mr. Middleton:—Park, Lincoln, and Frémont Counties are the three big-game counties of Wyoming, and as you inquire about hunting and trapping, I believe any of these counties would suit you, although I must caution you not to expect to get rich at trapping. One can make a little side money at it, 'tis true, but I am afraid it would prove to be a pretty slim living.

There is still plenty of land up there open to homestead entry. I would certainly advise you fellows to go up and look the country over. 'Tis quite a stock country, and you could undoubtedly get all the work you wanted during the Summer months in normal times, and at the same time be proving up on your homesteads.

The requirements to make entry under the homestead law are not many. One must be a citizen of the United States or have declared his intention of becoming such, or be the head of a family. One who has arrived at the age of eighteen and has served honorably in the Army or Navy is also qualified.

To tell you all there is to be said that is of interest to the prospective homesteader would take a lot of space, and then it would not all be told. Write to Mr. Chas. S. Hill, Commissioner, at State Capital Bldg., Cheyenne, Wyo., for literature concerning homesteading. He will cheerfully fix you out.

You might also write Mr. C. M. Cox, Cody, Wyo., and Mr. E. P. Perry, Torrington, Wyo., for lands in their territory, but my advice is to take a trip there, work in different localities and get an idea of just where you want to take a homestead. This northwest Wyoming is sure a big country, and there's a lot of opportunities left for a hustler.

If I can be of any further assistance don't be afraid to come again.

Other Baits for Channel Cat

AS THE fellow said about the other kind of cat, "There are more ways of killing it than choking it to death with butter:"

Question:—"Will you please tell me some good baits for channel catfish besides live minnows?"—L. GRANT, Joplin, Mo.

Answer, by Mr. Thompson:—If you have had no luck with the baits you used, try mussels, crawfish, large tadpoles or cheese dough. Keep bait down at the bottom of stream even at night when they are out feeding in the shallow water.

"Ask Adventure" service costs you nothing whatever but reply postage and self-addressed envelop.

The Maxim Silencer

IN HIS answer to another inquirer, Mr. Wiggins describes the Maxim silencer as "a cylindrical device, screwed on the muzzle of the rifle, which contains fins so shaped that the gases generated by the explosion are given a centrifugal action." That's how they lose their momentum; and momentum in this case means noise:

Question:—"I expect to go hunting this Fall; and as I have never bought any kind of firearms, although I have used some a little, I am asking your advice.

I have heard about the Maxim silencer for rifles. Do you think it would eliminate the noise? Where does the noise come from—the end of the barrel or from the chamber or cylinder on a revolver? What about a rifle?

If the cartridge is enclosed as in a repeater .22 or .30-30 does the fact that it is enclosed force the noise up on through and out of the barrel?

Does a .32-20 revolver take a .32-20 rifle shell? Has a .32-20 revolver more shocking-power than a .38 caliber, a .32-20 rifle more than a .30-30?

What make rifle .30-30 or .32-20 is best, and what will it cost?

Do you know how a derringer works? I mean the kind you read about in fiction, that gamblers used to use, and pull them from their sleeves.

Where could one be bought, and for how much? How much practise would it take to get the trick of pulling it out of your sleeve down "pat"? Or is it all hot air?

What is the difference between a double-action and a single-action revolver?"—MERRILL PERRY, Tacoma, Wash.

Answer, by Mr. Wiggins:—The Maxim silencer is adapted to rifles and single-shot pistols, but not to revolvers or automatic pistols. The gases are slowed down in their velocity by the silencer, and are then passed out of the muzzle in the customary manner. The noise is greatly reduced, but some remains.

Yes, the .32-20 revolvers shoot the regular .32-20 or .32 W. C. F. cartridges, and are more powerful than the .38 S. & W. cartridges, but less so than the .38 Specials, or .38-40s.

The .32-20 rifles are a low-power arm, and far less powerful than the .30-30s.

There is only one .32-20 made now, the Winchester. It's a good rifle; the .30-30 is made by Remington, Savage, and Winchester, and are all good guns, the choice being merely one of personal preference.

I have heard some persons used to carry derringers in their sleeves retained by an elastic cord, and when the arm was thrown downward by a jerk the pistol slid down the sleeve to where the hand could grasp it. I presume five years' steady practise would make a man proficient in this stunt. (The users were mostly killed by men who wore a .45 single-action Colt low down on the right leg, and drew 'er a-smokin'.)

The double-action revolver is one in which pulling the trigger will both cock and fire the revolver; the single action is one in which the hammer must be cocked by the thumb for each shot.

LOST TRAILS

Note—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible.* All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

HARPER, CHAS. E. Better known as Slim Harper around San Diego, Calif. Carpenter by trade. Last heard of at Aviation Field, North Island, was then deciding to leave for Baltimore, Md. His old side-kick would like to hear from him.—Address Leo F. Olsen (Lucky), 103 Grand View Rd., Ardmore, Pa.

KAVANAGH, NED and E. E. EGAN who served on the U. S. S. *Des Moines*, during 1910 and 1912. Last heard from at Brooklyn, N. Y. Your mother is ill and would like to hear from you.—Address J. P. Kavanagh, 21 School St., Lynn, Mass.

SAHLMAN, TOIVO. Last heard of in Canada. Was born in Hattula, Finland, thirty years ago. Anyone knowing his address kindly communicate.—Address Kalle Siimes, 9 Mission St., San Francisco, Calif.

STENGEL, MICHAEL R. Last seen in Sacramento, Calif., early 1911. Supposed to be owner of some restaurant in some town in Texas. Kindly write to me.—Address C. J. Donnelly, 719½ Crocker St., Los Angeles, Calif.

AURTHOR, B. S. Last seen in Manila, and "Shorty" G. last seen in Delano. If you see this address your old friend "Mac" at once.—Address E. C. MacDonald, care of Billboard, Cincinnati.

OUTLAND, MERRITT E. Last heard of in Findlay, Ohio, nine years ago. Was then ten years old. Light hair and blue eyes. Any information will be appreciated.—Address Russell L. Outland, 13th U. S. Signal Troop, Fort Bliss, Texas.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

BARRET, ALBERT. At one time a resident at 1237 So. Loomis St., Chicago, Ill. Any information will be appreciated.—Address Dave Fischer, care of J. Feldman, 2306 W. Potomac Ave., Chicago, Ill.

SMITH, JAMES, alias Nicholas Finley. Served throughout the Spanish-American War, was discharged at Mare Island, California, 1901. Born at Portsmouth, England. Age about forty-five years, five feet eight inches tall, black hair and brown eyes. Any information would be appreciated by his brother.—Address C. Finley, 4722 West 20th St., Cicero, Ill.

ADDISON. Write and let me know where you are.—Address Jas. C. Boeger, 1622 Juliet St., St. Paul Minn.

OLIVE, PRIVATE DAVE W. His home is in Los Angeles, Calif. Last seen when just discharged from Company A, 44 U. S. Infantry, at Fort Shafter, Honolulu, H. T. About eighteen years of age, brown eyes, black hair, ruddy complexion, five feet seven and one-half inches in height. Is probably some place on the west coast. Any information will be appreciated.—Address L. T. 445, care of *Adventure.*

CURTIS, JAS. R. of Lima, Ohio. Last heard from W. Va. Any information will be appreciated.—Address J. Chatvairè, C. A. S., Robertson, Alta., Canada.

Inquiries will be printed three times, then taken out. In the February 10th issue all unfound names asked for during the past two years will be reprinted alphabetically.

WANT to hear from any of the boys who served with Signal Corps in Mexico or at Columbus, New Mexico, during the Punitive Expedition during 1916 and 1917, who knew me and recall the accident that happened to me at Columbus, when my skull was fractured. Also want to hear from any of the boys that served at March Field, Riverside, California, during the war, that were familiar with me and were at the field at the time I resigned as Disbursing Clerk.—Address Jerome E. Lane, 505 Frederick St., Detroit, Michigan.

McFEAT, EDWARD GEORGE. Late from Southampton, England, also from Canada. Age thirty-one years, weight one hundred and fifty pounds, blue-gray eyes, height five feet eight inches, ruddy complexion. Was member of 5th Canadian Battalion. If any of his former mates know anything of his whereabouts, kindly communicate with his sister.—Address Alice Patricia McFeat, 2247 Flora St., Cincinnati, Ohio.

WILLIAMS, PATRICK. Son of Daniel and Norah Kelly Williams. Born in Mullingar County, Westmeath, Ireland, lived with relatives in Chicago until he went to California where he was last heard from. Any information will be appreciated.—Address T. L. W. care of *Adventure.*

TARPLY, THOMAS E. A Court Reporter. Left Chicago, Ill., about a year and eight months ago. Last heard from at Detroit, Mich. Age about thirty-three years, five feet, eight inches tall, blue eyes. Also a good stenographer. Any information will be appreciated by his mother.—Address Mrs. Tarply, care of *Adventure.*

JOHNSON, JEFFERSON RANDOLPH. A Methodist Minister, was living in Burlington, Iowa, between 1865 and 1870. A matter of great importance must be settled and some of his heirs must be found. An heir of his, or any one knowing about any of his heirs, will confer a great favor by communicating with Miss Ruth Wakefield, 915 Forsythe St., Beaumont, Texas.

O'TOOLE, JOHN WILLIAM. Last heard of in San Francisco, Calif., in 1900. Was playing football. Any information will be appreciated by his family.—Address Samuel O'Toole, 75 Baldwin St., Pawtucket, R. I.

FARMER, FRANK D. Please write.—Address Ruth Farmer, 5638 S. Ada St., Chicago Ill.

SMIGOSKI, JOHN M. Left home, Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, April 7, 1922. Age eighteen years. Height about five feet six inches, weight about one hundred and thirty pounds, gray eyes, light brown hair. Slightly bow-legged, has scar behind left ear, wore dark blue suit with light stripe, dark brown cap and dark brown shoes. Carried a slip-on sweater, black and yellow all over. Also carried a vest-pocket camera. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly notify me at once, as his mother is ill.—Address Wm. S. Smigoski, Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana.

HOFFMAN, PAUL. Born in Saxony, Germany. Last heard of in Elma, Washington, probably working in some lumber or railroad camp in the state of Washington. Age about forty-two years, very fair complexion, small peculiar eyes, kind of short-sighted look. Blond hair, falling over the temple. Anyone knowing his whereabouts kindly communicate with—Address L. T. 444, care of *Adventure.*

WESTHAVER, P. Last heard from at Frank and Macleod, Alberta, Can. Supposed to have gone to Boston. Any information will be appreciated.—Address J. CHATVAIRE, C. A. S., Robertson, Alta., Canada.

MESECAR, JOSEPH ALFRED. Lived in Detroit, Michigan, about fifteen years ago. Died at age sixty-nine. If any of his relatives see this they are asked to communicate with his son.—Address RODERICK A. MESECAR, Hdg. Battery, 11th F. A. Honolulu, H. T.

MARSHALL, DELIA ARNOLD. Her husband, Charlie Marshall was mayor of Grant Pass in 1903. Since moved to California. Father is dead. Please write sister.—Address MRS. EMMA DAILEY, Box E. 85, Portland, Oregon.

STEINKE, LE ROY. Last heard from was at Bend, Oregon. Sometimes served as cook with logging crews. Unmarried, barber by trade. Any information will be appreciated.—Address ADOLPH R. STEINKE, Eagle Bend, Minn.

WOODUS, T. M. A medical student at Valparaiso University, Ind. Left college with course uncompleted in the Spring of 1914, with intention and desire to see the world and seek adventure. He was twenty years of age at the time. Last heard from on April 17, 1914, by post card from Seattle, Wash. About five feet ten inches in height, brunet, hazel eyes, slight build, weighing about 150 pounds, aquiline nose and high forehead. Any information will be appreciated by his mother.—Address MRS. E. H. WOODUS, care of The Star Newspaper, Wilmington, Delaware.

SMITH, ARTHUR JAMES (Jim). Last heard of in New York about the end of May, 1921. Was then in the employment of the Barber Steamship Co., as Chief Steward on the Steamship *Suruga* running to Honolulu, China and Japan. Last known address was 3rd or 4th Avenue, Brooklyn, N. Y. Blue eyes, fair complexion, weight about 160 pounds, five feet eight inches in height. Big toe on left foot missing owing to trolley accident in Jersey City some years ago. Any information will be appreciated by his brother.—Address Thomas Smith, Steward Steamship Vasari, Lamport & Holt Line, Pier 14, Hoboken, New Jersey.

MAIL received during the current month is held by Adventure for following persons, who may obtain it by sending present address and proof of identity.

MAIL—Dennis, F. C.: Lange, Algot: May, E. G.: Martin, Harry; Watson, J. C.

A COMPLETE list of unclaimed mail will be published in January 30th and July 30th issues of Adventure.

THE following have been inquired for in either the August 10th or August 20th issues of Adventure. They can get the names of the inquirers from this magazine:

BAUER, C. J.; Bound, John F.; Colam, Frank Howe; Conklin, Buhl Mr. & Mrs.; Deady, John; Finnegan, Joseph Patrick; Glenn, Bowdin; Gowder, Clarence Milton; Haberly, Francis K. & Dr. S. S.; Hetzel, Claude Leroy; Irving, James D.; Jackson, Howard; Keenan, Wm.; Keeney Joe; Mason, Albert, L.; Masters, Mark B.; McIver, Lawrence; Miller, Edward; Mitchell, Geo.; Nelson, John (Battler); O'Donnell, Joseph; Quinn, Jasalph; Reed, Lucede; Slaven, Joe; Smith, Ben; Timmel, Ed; Wilson, John P; Wooding, W. A.

MISCELLANEOUS—All members of Dept. Q. M. C. Fort Clark, Texas, during 1919-1920 are requested to write to one of the old boys; Would like to hear from Albert Diar somewhere in North Carolina, or any other fellow who served in the Sec. Holding Co., under command of Major Bracas, at La Suze, France; Would like to hear from any of the old bunch who served with me in either Co. E, or Headquarters Co. 166 Infantry 42nd Division during the war; Would like to hear from some of his shipmates aboard the S. S. *Kimta* after we left Antwerp, Belgium, in Dec., 1919.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

PLEASE send us your present address. Letters forwarded to you at address given us do not reach you.—Address L. PATRICK GREENE, care of *Adventure.*

THE TRAIL AHEAD

SEPTEMBER 10TH ISSUE

Besides the complete novel and the two complete novelettes mentioned on the second page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories:

UNCLE HENRY WOULD ENJOY THIS — ***Edwin Hunt Hoover***
The fight for the ranch.

THE NAKED TRUTH — ***J. D. Newsom***
Money means nothing to the New Caledonian savage who wants a bleached skull for his house.

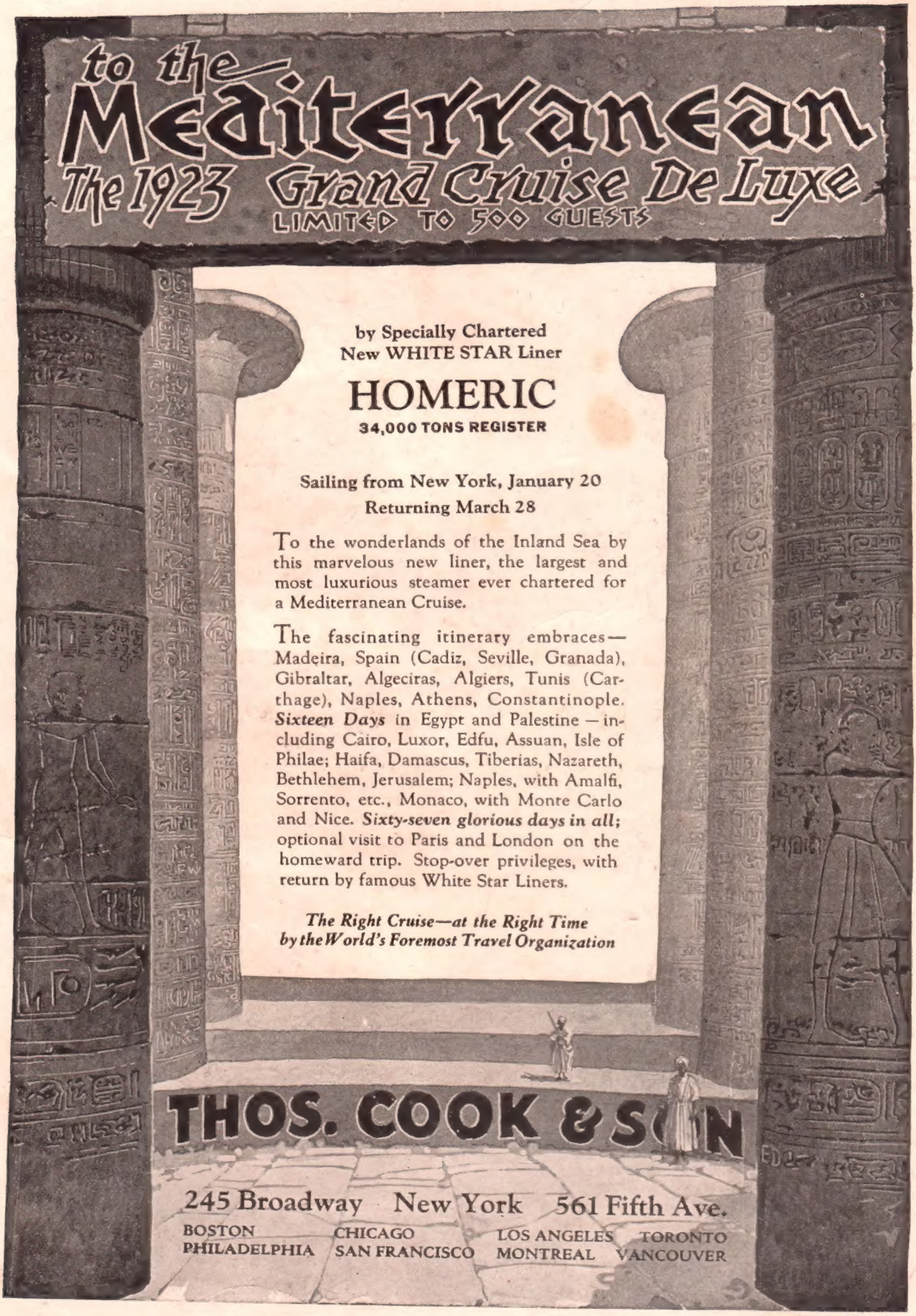
OKSOOK — ***Ernest Bertelson***
The medicine-man hears moaning sobs at night on the frozen Yukon.

THE GRAY CHARTERIS A Four-Part Story Part III — ***Robert Simpson***
The gray man "stages" a conference at Agwala-town.

N'YAWK AND ELSWARE — ***Max Bonter***
The railroad foreman turns a "softie" loose in the wilderness.

THE OUTCAST — ***F. St. Mars***
A coyote and a roebuck fight to a finish.

THE PATROL — ***Leonard H. Nason***
War is ——



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